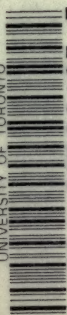
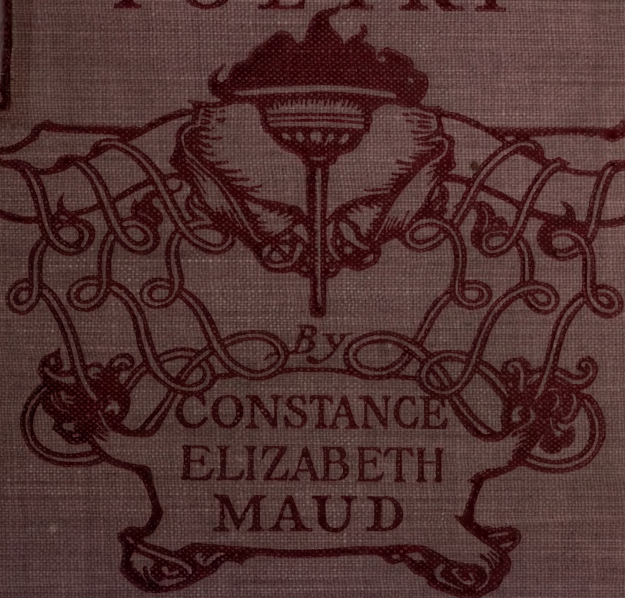


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HEROINES of POETRY



By
CONSTANCE
ELIZABETH
MAUD

Illustrated



Heroines of Poetry



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HEROINES OF POETRY

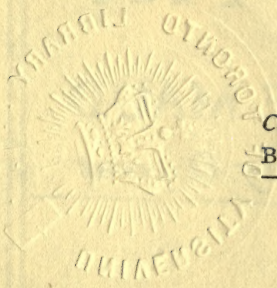
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Maid of the Swan-skin



Maid of the Swan-skin

CHAPTER I

MANY years ago there lived in Norway a farmer who had three sons.

The two elder were strong, active fellows, on whom their father could rely at all seasons, whether for ploughing, dyking, sowing, or reaping. They ate and drank with a heartiness which never flagged, and slept so soundly at night the crack of doom would not have disturbed them.

But the youngest son, John, was by no means so satisfactory. He was a tall, well-favoured youth enough, but no one could depend on him for even half a day's steady work. He would set out to plough with the best intentions in the world, but before he had been at work long he was sure to stop short in the middle of a furrow, either listening to a lark overhead or gazing at an upturned daisy at his feet, and murmuring strange rhymes to it, like that other lad who ploughed the fields in Scotland many years after.

Then at night, if it were summer or spring time, as likely as not John would be wandering out of doors, or in winter sitting at the window talking to the stars — “Anything,” as his father said, “rather than sleep in his bed like a good Christian.”

As for meal-time, he never seemed to know when it was, and had it not been for his mother, whose favourite he was, John would often have fared badly. But she always found some excuse for his stupid and awkward conduct, and nursed in secret a belief that her youngest son would one day be a great man. To her he would repeat the strange rhymes which came into his head, and wonderful tales of by-gone days in Norway — days when Odin and Freya held their court in Valhalla, and heroes and poets dwelt among those very hills and fiords.

And his mother, listening, would forget her baking and spinning, her hands falling idly on her lap, her eyes taking on a far-off look as though she saw through the open window the people of those grand old days passing in stately procession across her own meadows. Then with a start and sigh she would remember that the bread must be scorching in the oven and the menfolk would soon be in from the fields; for life had trained her into a practical housewife, though her eyes, like her son John's, were those of a poet.

Now, the farmer had a meadow to the south of

his estate, which was the pride and joy of his heart. As hay-harvest drew near his eye shone with satisfaction when it rested on the fine crop of sweet grass spread like a thick, green carpet from end to end.

"On Saint John's Day," he said, "'t will be ready to cut."

But three days before the time fixed a grievous thing happened. The goodman, walking round his farm early in the morning according to his wont, beheld to his dismay a full third of the ripening grass trodden down.

That evening when all were assembled in the big hall the farmer told his sons what had befallen. "It is surely some enemy hath done this deed," he said; and turning to his eldest son:

"Thorolf, take thou the great cross-bow, and go this night, hide in the hawthorn-brake, and watch the southern meadow until dawn."

Thorolf did not half like the job. He much preferred his truckle-bed in the snug loft. He rose unwillingly, took down the great cross-bow hanging on the wall, and, in case it should come to a hand-to-hand fight with the enemy, armed himself also with a strong-bladed knife.

Then, having well drunk to keep up his spirits, he went off to the hawthorn-brake and lay down on a soft bank of sorrel.

It was not long before he fell asleep, and slept

as soundly as on his truckle-bed in the loft. When he awoke the sun was already high, and on looking towards the meadow he beheld a large new portion freshly trodden down.

Thorolf went home with hanging head. He had thought to return as a hero, with a fine tale of how he had caught the thieves, fought valiantly, and chastised them well; but here was the field as a sorry witness against him.

His father's wrath and scorn sent him off, sulking, to work for the rest of the day at the farthest end of the farm.

That evening the goodman told his second son, Thord, to go watch and see if he could meet with better luck than his brother.

So Thord, having made a hearty supper, armed himself in the same fashion as Thorolf, and went down to the hawthorn-brake.

But in the morning he too came home with shame-faced gait, and owned he fell asleep before the moon went down, and on waking found the same enemy had been at work again.

The goodman upbraided him bitterly, and scoffed at both his sons for a pair of sleepy-headed fools and gluttons, who would be dearly bought at a handful of groats.

Then John, who lay stretching himself lazily on the floor, looked up with a laugh.

"Now all my peace is over! Thou wilt be sending me to keep the third watch. Well, father, take comfort; I will find out by to-morrow who does the mischief!"

But the farmer replied scornfully:

"A likely thing indeed that a fool such as thou wilt do better than thy brothers! Verily, thou good-for-naught, I have a mighty mind to save thy bread and beer by sending thee to sea with some tough skipper who will teach thee at the rope's end. Yet, since thou canst do no harm in this case, thou shalt watch to-night, and if thou dost succeed I will fill thy biggest hood with silver pennies to squander in the market-town."

John agreed good-humouredly. He knew his father's wrath soon passed, and there was much excuse for it, such a lazy son as himself being a grievous trial to the goodman.

Under the sweet-scented pine-trees John dreamed and dozed all that June day. But with the moon he rose and went down to the hawthorn-brake beside the meadow. He took no cross-bow or knife, like his brother, for he said to himself, "If it should be some evil-doer and I draw on him, why, he might slay me in return!" Though brave enough, John had no mind to give his life for a load of hay. "But," thought he, "I shall see no men this night; 't is the fairy folk, sure enough, who are at work,

and for such only weapons like those of Sigurd can avail — Sigurd, who drank of Fafnir's blood and won Brynhild."

Thinking of those good old days and wishing them back again, John lay in the hawthorn-brake and watched the summer night through. But he waited in vain for any sign of either men or fairy folk.

The dawn crept slowly across the sky, a high wind rose, and an early thrush started the morning chorus of the birds.

Then all at once John felt that nothing in the world would be so good as to lie down on the sorrel and sleep. His eyelids half closed, feeling like weights of lead, but with a mighty effort he roused himself in sudden fear lest after all his night-watch should prove vain.

Again the drowsiness crept over him like a charm, when suddenly a rushing sound in the air made him start up wide awake.

Peeping out between the branches he beheld circling over the meadow seven snow-white swans, which one by one dropped softly on the grass.

For a moment he thought of scaring them off, but was held back by the curious behaviour of these birds. They moved with the dignity of royal persons, and as they alighted peered around as though to make sure they were alone. Surely

these could be no ordinary swans. John drew back among the bushes lest he should be seen. Presently, on looking out again, the birds were gone, and in their place stood seven of the fairest damsels that ever John had seen in his fondest day-dreams. He held his breath for awe and wonder.

Beside them on the grass lay six white swan-skins — the seventh hung on the arm of a maiden whose face was turned from him, but whom he instantly felt sure must be the fairest and sweetest of all. Like a queen she moved amongst the rest, and at a sign from her they began to form into a circle holding hands. Then in low tones they spoke a language strange to John, and the voice of her who held the swan-skin thrilled him with a strange delight. He longed impatiently to see her face.

And now in measured time to a sweet, old-fashioned melody the seven maidens began to dance, swaying their graceful forms backwards and forwards, their long hair floating in the morning breeze.

And as they danced she with the wonderful voice turned and John saw her face.

It seemed to him the very birds stayed their singing for joy and wonder at the sight of such rare beauty. John's heart stood still, while all his

soul went out to her with a sudden, mighty love. And as he gazed between the branches the thought of losing her smote him like a knife, and he watched breathless with alarm lest she should go as she had come.

Suddenly his eye fell on the swan-skin she had let fall when the dance began. It lay so near him that by stretching out his hand he could touch it. A moment more and he had drawn it through the branches. "At least she shall not go till she has spoken to me," he thought, and trembled at the rashness of his deed.

The maidens continued to dance, first one and then another taking the lead — a good acre more of the poor farmer's ripe grass bent down under their lightly flying feet. It was clear they preferred the untrodden portion of the field for their fairy dance.

At length the morning sun began to mount, sending golden shafts of light through trees and hedges and drawing long shadows across the grass.

Then the maidens paused in their dance, and she who seemed the queen murmured something low, at which one by one they took up their white swan-skins and moved towards the shadow of the hawthorn-brake.

John's breath came quickly as she, his Love, passed close to him. The terrible moment was

near when she must discover his theft. He crouched low among the branches—he heard the rustling of feathers—then quick, hurried movements and eager words, followed presently by cries of alarm and woe.

John peered out. There in the meadow she stood, sobbing as though her heart would break, while round her pressed the six white swans, caressing and consoling her. At last, one by one, each bade her a sad farewell and flew up into the air, uttering wailing cries of sorrow and distress.

Higher and higher they circled above till nothing but six white specks could be seen, and then vanished into the blue of the summer sky.

For a long time the poor deserted maiden stood motionless, her hands covering her fair face. At last she looked round in piteous misery, and moaned.

John felt his heart melting for very pity; he parted the branches which hid him and would have thrown himself at her feet, but at the first sound of the bending twigs she started up in terror and fled across the field. John, fearing she would escape him, followed close after; faster and faster she went, till the sound of some one pursuing made her so faint with fear that her feet failed her.

Cowering down in the grass she turned and

faced her unknown foe. In his hand she saw the lost swan-skin. He dared not speak.

She gazed at him in terror. "What have I done," she cried, "that thou shouldst do me such ill? Did I ever harm thee or thine, that thou shouldst show me such hate?"

He tried to speak. He wanted to tell her of his great love, but not a word would come. He looked on her, feeling ashamed of his deed, yet not repenting, because only so could he detain her. Something of what he felt she saw in his beseeching eyes, but she shrank back with a new dread.

"Ah, I see," she cried; "thou thinkest to have caught a prize! But a poor prey thou shalt take—a thing of stone to dwell among thy folk, hiding a heart that hateth thee!"

John looked so wretched as she spoke these words that her gentle heart was moved to sudden pity.

"Nay, I do not hate thee now," she said softly; "and who knows what I might come to feel for thee if only thou restore me my swan-skin."

She smiled at him so sweetly through her tears John felt his own eyes blinded by a mist. She felt no fear of him now. In truth, a strange, new feeling was stealing round her heart which made her almost happy.

"Wouldst thou rejoice if I held thee dear?" she

murmured softly. "Dear to me though far away? Ah, do this only for my sake, and thou shalt not go utterly forlorn though thou see me never again. What thou hast felt this summer morn shall make thy life the fairer and richer all thy days. For thou hast met with Love! To thee henceforth the old tale shall be true — the dull life lived by others false — though we must part think it not therefore all in vain that we met!"

She stretched out her hand and took his. And at that touch John trembled. Fear and hope tortured him in turn. Throwing himself at her feet he cried beseechingly:

"Ah, sweetly dost thou plead, but my agony is the greater for thy sweetness. Oh, hear me at least before my doom — before this hour of bliss turn to grey ashes all my days to come. What can I say, how can I move thy hard heart if this move thee not, that I love thee; with all my soul I love thee now and for ever!"

She looked on him sadly.

"Alas!" she said, "what can I do? for I *must* go to that far land from whence I come, though sorrowfully I leave thee."

Then John sprang up with a bitter cry: "Thou knowest not my agony; thou knowest not what thou sayest." And then in words like a torrent not to be stemmed he told her how this new-

found, mighty love filled his whole being; henceforth life without her must be a dreary waste and he most utterly forlorn.

She trembled as he drew nearer to her, but did not move away. She looked up at him with a soft light in her wondrous eyes — but, just as he would have folded her in his arms, she started from him with a sudden cry of alarm.

“Touch me not, lest thou shouldst die!” Then she told him if he would verily be her Love he must choose between his country and that far-distant home from whence she came, for not even with love’s strength to uphold her might she dwell in this land of his. And she besought him to think well what he did, for in his own country he would surely rise to greatness and taste of fame and power, while in that distant land with her he would remain unknown and obscure, love alone and love’s joy would be his.

The choice seemed no hard one to John. What was the world to him now? Kneeling, he besought his sweet Love only not to leave him. Fame, power, greatness among the sons of men were but dead, worthless joys. Alas! she could not really love him, or she would never speak thus of parting. She listened with a wistful smile to his eager words, like one very wise in past and future knowledge.

At last she spoke, consenting, as if needs must, in spite of wisdom:

“Come, then, O Love, bring me to some shady nook where we may make ready for our journey to that far-off land!”

Overjoyed at her words John led her to where thick trees arched overhead and a carpet of leaves spread on the ground. Drawing from her finger a curious ring, set with a dark-green stone, she placed it on John’s left hand. Then again she looked into his eyes, as though to read his very soul.

“The time may come when thou mayst repent thee of this gift,” she replied. “Hast thou not heard of lovers who outlived the love they once thought strong enough to move the world? Be wise in time, then. Cast the ring away, give me the swan-skin, and let us part before that sad day dawn!”

But he answered, pained and angry:

“If I have only won thy pity, not thy love, do as thou wilt; go free.”

Then she saw that indeed he would be content with nothing less than her love, whatever the cost. So with gentle, soothing words she bade him lie down upon the beech-leaves, nothing doubting, for all should be as he wished.

Gladly John obeyed her. And soon a mist

seemed to float before his eyes, which followed his Love as she moved softly to and fro, singing a low, crooning song. His sight grew dim, and as his eyelids closed the last thing he remembered was her fair face bending tenderly over him.

CHAPTER II

HOW long John slept he never knew. When he awoke at last his eyes opened upon a land of marvellous beauty. Half dreaming, half waking, he stretched out his hands, and, as they met the soft clasp of his Love, he thought he was indeed in Paradise. She looked more fair than ever, robed in softly flowing raiment of a texture fine and wonderful, rainbow-hued, unlike anything fashioned on earth. With tender words of welcome she greeted him, and hand in hand they roamed through the beautiful land which was her home.

Everything in this country delighted John. The very air they breathed was finer, softer, more balmy than any he had known before. The sun did not scorch even at its height; there was no glare in the light. Countless streams murmured among the hills and fed the blue lakes of the fertile valleys. Fruitful trees and flowers of rarest scent and beauty abounded in this land of perpetual spring and freshness.

Never had John pictured to himself so sweet and fair a country. All seemed happy here. The

animals and birds lived peaceful and fearless, for there was no slaying or fighting, the fruits of the country supplying all that the inhabitants needed for food; and, since there was work enough and play enough for all, sorrow and evil found no place here.

As they roamed from one fair scene to another John's heart was so full of joy he could find no word to speak, but, clasping tightly the soft hand of his Love, he prayed he might not wake and find it all a dream. And soon he became assured it was no dream, but a more real life than any he had hitherto lived, while his Love told him many things he had never known before and showed him many wondrous sights.

So time flew by on golden wings, while for three years John dwelt in that blessed land, tasting happiness as nearly perfect as mortal man can know. And so he might have gone on all his days but that after a time there sprang up in his heart a great longing for his native country and his own people. He became gloomy and restless, feeling his life so apart from theirs.

His Love was not slow to note the change in him and guess the cause. She knew that the old life was drawing him back, that love alone was no longer enough to satisfy him.

So she determined, without letting him guess

she knew the cause of his discontent, to help him to go. Perhaps after a time love would draw him back to her and to her country.

One day she told him sadly that a trouble threatened their happiness.

He sprang to his feet eagerly. "O Sweet, fear naught," he cried. "Gladly will I go to meet the foe; only say where I may find him."

She answered that the trouble came from his own land, but for her sake she begged he would not ask now what the danger was, but trust her and go back for a while to his old home, there awaiting what should next befall. They must part and endure sadness for a while, but by-and-by their joy should be the greater if he but trusted in her love.

At the thought of parting John's heart felt heavy, yet he longed for his own land again and was impatient to be off. Taking her hands in his he said:

"Would that I knew if thou hast ever loved me, Sweet — then surely all things would I meet with a good heart."

For answer she bade him look in her eyes and read the love there — love which could never cease.

Then he took her in his arms and wept, feeling dimly that there was something in her love greater and nobler than in his.

And she wept also as she led him to the oak-tree under whose branches he had first awakened in that fair land. Here she bade him again lie down. But before he fell asleep she begged he would promise, whatever happened, never to call on her to come to him in his own land. The wish itself would do no harm, but should he put it into words then would they both be undone, for so strong was the tie between them that at his first bidding she would be forced to come to him, and "the great-eyed, glaring sun that lights your world," she said, "is too mighty to look upon our secret bliss. But every night go watch for an hour by the hawthorn-brake, and if there is need I will surely come."

Sadly John promised that in all things he would trust her, abide where she wished, and go where she willed.

Then, kneeling at his side, she took his last kiss of farewell, and as his eyes closed she sang in a soft, low voice a mystic song, which, listening to, he fell into a long, deep, dreamless sleep.

When John awoke at last, to his surprise he found himself again in the familiar beech-wood of his own home. He tried to remember how he came to be there, but all the past was blurred and dim, like a dream within a dream. Then, just as

in the olden days, he wondered with a sudden pang how long he had been sleeping, and started up to hurry home, lest he should be late for the mid-day meal.

And as he came out of the wood the sun struck full on his clothes, all richly embroidered with gold and silver thread, and memory came rushing back to him.

He stood on the brow of the hill and looked down on the roof of the old homestead, the well-tilled land round the farm, the rich grass-fields, and at his feet that southern meadow where first he had met his Love. At thought of her such longing filled his heart he dared not stay to think, but hurried down the slope towards his home. In the distance he heard the well-known call of the horn, summoning all to the dinner prepared in the large farm-hall.

Two labourers at the foot of the hill gazed up at John as he came down; he could see they were wondering who the stranger might be.

Everything about the old home was just the same. Nothing had changed; there were the self-same ducks swimming round the pond, the same girl driving the geese, and the same apples, so it seemed to John, hanging from the old tree near the gate.

Nothing had changed save himself.

John felt a keen pang, half sorrow, half shame, that he had grown so different from his own kin.

He stood outside the old wooden porch and listened a moment to the cheerful sounds within. He could hear his father's voice. Then he took down the big horn and blew a clear blast, and pushed open the door.

There they sat, just in the old fashion, round the well-spread board,—the goodman on his high seat, a silver cup in his hand; the mother by his side, with Thord and Thorolf, and the other familiar faces he had known from his youth. Only one stranger he saw, a fair-haired woman, who sat near Thord.

Every eye was turned to the door, where John stood in his glittering doublet and hose. The serving-maids, beer-can in hand, gazed at the magnificent stranger open-mouthed, while Haldor, the old Iclander, John's foster-father, half drew his sword, from long habit of being ever on the defence.

Then uprose the goodman, and bade a hearty welcome to the stranger, inviting the fair lord, whoever he might be, to share their homely meal.

In a feigned voice John replied gratefully, accepting his hospitality. "For," said he, "I am

both hungry and foot-weary." And then, in order to account for such a finely clad gentleman being without a horse, John forthwith made up a tale of how, having dismounted to quench his thirst at a stream, his horse had been frightened at the screeching of an old jay-bird, and had galloped away at full speed, leaving his master to go on foot like any churl.

"Methinks thou art more like an earl than a churl," said the goodman, laughing; "but come, sit you here and eat."

So John took a seat by his father's side and joined in the eating and laughter with hearty goodwill.

But he noted how his mother's eyes were often fixed upon him: and once he saw they were all dimmed with tears.

Another pair of eyes also wandered often John's way. These belonged to the fair woman who sat near Thord, and who John guessed rightly to be his brother's betrothed.

The meal over the father rose, and, calling to his sons, went off to the fields, leaving John with the women-folk.

Thorgerd, Thord's fair betrothed, and the other maidens, brought out their spinning-wheels, and would have gladly stayed to gaze still on the handsome stranger, but John's mother bade them

all be gone to other work. Thorgerd was sent to the weaving-room. She went unwillingly, lingering long on the threshold.

John sat on a low stool, thinking many thoughts. After looking at him some time in silence, his mother went out also, leaving him alone.

Presently she called her trusted maiden, Ase, and bade her fetch some strange-looking raiment, a dark-blue cloak and hood, embroidered with the sun, moon, and stars. "Go lay them at the feet of the stranger in the hall, and return without a word," she said.

John started as Ase laid the things silently down and left. He took up the cloak and remembered all at once how he had worn these clothes in sport one merry Christmas time. Flinging the cloak round him, he paced to and fro, humming the old carol he had sung that evening long ago, when the snow lay thick on the ground and the wind beat on the door.

And as he sang in absent mood his mother came and stood before him, looking at him with yearning love. And John ran to her and folded her in his arms with a cry of joy.

Long they sat together, talking, laughing, and weeping. John told his mother somewhat of the wonderful things that had befallen him, but so strange it sounded to her ears she thought he

must have been to that world which common men reach only through the gate of death. And she begged this son, for whom she had always believed a great and glorious future, to tell her of the glories of Paradise, and whether in truth the loved and lost on earth meet again up there.

John looked at her pale, earnest face wistfully. Even this dear, loving mother could not understand him when he spoke of his life in the land of his Beloved. How should she know? How could he tell? Only those who have slept beneath the Hawthorn, to the mystic song of that magic voice, can understand and know.

So he kissed her gently, saying he knew no more than she of that mysterious Land beyond the grave. But in the kingdom of his Beloved great joy and happiness had been his, that he could assure her. And now a time had come when with blind eyes he must wait patiently for what the future held in store.

"Meanwhile," he said, "I live and rejoice, dear mother, that I may still give thee some days of happiness."

So they talked together until evening, when the men returned from their work.

Then John made himself known to his father and brothers, and there was great rejoicing. The goodman at first could scarcely believe that this

noble stranger was indeed his youngest son, John, whom in the old days he had so despised.

Astonished they listened as John told of his marvellous adventures on that summer night when he went down to watch the southern meadow. Just what he saw he did not tell, but said that strange, unknown folk had come and borne him far away to a wondrous land, where he had fared well and after a while married the King's daughter. And these folk would come again, he said, and fetch him away in their ship after he had tarried awhile with his own people.

The brothers, Thord and Thorolf, gave John a good welcome, but they no longer felt at home with him. He was different from themselves, and they half feared and half despised him in consequence.

Thorgerd, when she learned who John was, did not seem to think so much of him. She had deemed him to be a King's son at least. But she lost her foolish heart to him all the same, and determined to try and win his love; for Thord, her betrothed, appeared to her now but a dull clown, quite unworthy of her notice.

CHAPTER III

AS day by day went by in the old way each hour began to drag more heavily upon John. The longing he felt once more to see his Love became at times well-nigh unbearable.

Again and again was he obliged to force back the forbidden words which rushed to his lips.

Every evening as she had bidden him he went to the meadow where first they had met, but no sign came from his Love, though often he lingered till the sun set and the moon rose.

All knew of this custom of John's, but none questioned him. They looked on him as a strange, dreamy being whose actions were sure to be unlike those of sensible people. Only Thorgerd ventured sometimes to follow him softly at a distance, watching what he did and wondering why he went there. Sometimes as he turned homewards she would join him, trying with sweet smiles and softly spoken words to beguile him into noticing her. And there were days when John's heart so ached

with weariness, waiting for his Love who gave no sign, that he allowed himself to find comfort in her bright presence, and would look on her with so kindly a smile that Thorgerd made sure his love was hers at last. But in truth John's heart never wavered from his Beloved. All others were to him but moving images.

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Summer went by and autumn gave place to winter.

His mother noted with a sad heart that John's gloom increased. In the old days he would have told her all that troubled him; now a wall seemed to have grown up between them and she was powerless to help him.

It was Christmas day. The snow lay like a thick white mantle over all the land as John went down in the waning light to the hawthorn-brake.

In the farm-house were gay doings, feasting and rejoicing, the old hall hung with garlands of evergreen, and preparations going on for a grand feast and merry-making in the evening.

Amidst all this joy John felt his loneliness the more keenly. The sound of laughter struck him like a blow. As he looked out over the glistening snow-field all his heart went out in a silent cry to his Beloved. But no sound broke the stillness save his own deep sighs. Then

despair seized him, and he told himself she had forgotten him in that far home of hers, or surely she would not leave him thus lonely and sad. Then he resolved to defy all consequences, and see if his call could reach her. Come what may, he must hold her in his arms once more, and be assured she was still his.

In a voice which echoed round the still, white field he cried, "Oh, come to me, my Love! If still thou lovest me let thy heart be moved by my entreaty. Come to me, for I am wretched and alone, and weary of my life without thee!"

The forbidden words were spoken. But John was too desperate to care what happened if only she came to him. He waited, listening breathlessly. But the twilight faded out of the sky, the pale, crescent moon looked down between the snow-laden branches of the dark pines, and not a sound could be heard in all that white land.

Then, in his despair, John cursed the day when first love awoke in his miserable heart. Bitterly he sighed, "'Tis all in vain — in vain. She comes not — she hears me not." With weary steps he turned homewards.

Suddenly his heart gave a bound of hope and joy, for, as he neared the gate, there, in the pale light, stood a woman in long cloak and hood.

Swiftly she came towards him, both hands outstretched to greet him.

Overcome with delight he cried :

"O my Love, did I do wrong to call thee? Have I loved too much? Speak, and take away my fear." He bent over the hooded head, and a low voice whispered in his ear words of tender love. But with a cry of dismay he shrank back, letting go the soft hands he had seized so eagerly, for it was Thorgerd's voice that spoke.

Thorgerd, waiting at the gate for his return, had thought his call was for her. "At last," she said to herself, "he loves me, indeed, and cannot keep this cold silence longer." Joyfully she had gone out to meet him, but when, at the sound of her voice, he turned from her with a groan of despair, she burst out indignantly :

"Didst thou not call me? Am not I thy Love?" Letting fall her dark cloak she stood before him in all her beauty, clad in her finest bravery for the Christmas feast, and on her golden hair a crown of silver leaves.

But John gazed at her dreamily, with eyes that saw not her beauty. Sighing bitterly he said :

"No love can move my heart save my own Love — my worshipped one. Ah, would that her loved feet might cross the threshold this night!"

His words were like a stab to Thorgerd. With

one look she turned and fled from him into the house; but at last she understood.

.

That night there were great doings in honour of Yule-tide. The old farm-house rang with laughter and song; but two hearts felt heavy and sore in the midst of all that mirth.

After the feast came toasts, first to the absent kinsfolk and then to the great Heroes of the past. John raised his goblet and called out the name of One whose songs still lived in every valley, though his voice had been hushed for a hundred years. Suddenly he started and turned pale, for a long-drawn sound, as of a distant horn, was heard outside. Again it came, nearer this time and clearer. The men put their hands quickly to their swords, but the goodman cried out to open wide the outer doors and let the strangers in. "Give them a merry welcome," he said, "whoever they be that come upon a Christmas night."

The stormy wind blew in the snow with a great gust as they flung wide the doors, and in their midst there stood a woman, tall and straight as a lily, clad all in white, with the fairest, sweetest face they had ever seen. In a voice like music she spoke, wishing peace and joy to all who dwelt in that house. Then, looking round, her eyes fell on John, who for joy could neither move nor

speak, but gazed on her as though he saw some fair vision.

“Far away I heard thy voice, O Love,” she said, “and I am come to thee!”

Then John went to her with outstretched arms, and, as he held her once more to his heart, he forgot all things save his own great joy.

The company looked on in awe and wonder, half believing they saw some angel or spirit, till John turned to them, his face radiant, and said how this was no other than his Beloved, who, for his sake, had left her bright home and come to dwell among them for a while. Then he led her to his parents, and with words of loving greeting she kissed them both and sat down by their side.

Like some fair, gracious Queen she seemed, to whom all men must needs do homage, as indeed all did who beheld her wondrous beauty. And for many a year after was that Yule-tide remembered. Men would tell how on that night was granted them a vision of love, perfect and divine, not to be quite forgotten while this grey life should last.

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At length the guests departed and the household retired to rest.

John felt such joy at having his Beloved once

more with him that he had no thought for the breaking of his vow.

And from her lips came no word of reproach. In her eyes he saw only the love and nothing of the pain and grief which filled her heart.

But when he slept she rose, and, looking at him through her falling tears, she sobbed in broken tones:

“Farewell, O Love. Alas for the weary days in the lonely land where I must now go—the prison of untrustful love! That far-distant land east of the sun, west of the moon. Would that my words might pierce thy dream. Woe is me, thy lack of trust has parted us, perhaps for ever! Farewell!”

So soundly John slept he felt neither her tears nor kisses of farewell.

Silently, like a spirit, she passed from the room, down the stairs, and out of the sleeping house; out into the cold winter night, and was seen no more in that land.

With the first streak of faint, grey dawn, John awoke. He murmured her name—a name unknown to any save himself. He stretched forth his hand and smiled to think of his great happiness. Then, starting up suddenly, he saw he was alone. The terrible truth flashed on him. She had gone—gone for ever! Had she not warned

him, implored him, whatever his longing, not to speak it in words, for then must she come to him, and thus would they both be undone.

Alas, alas, his own act had now separated them, perhaps for ever!

Misery and despair overwhelmed him. What became of him he cared not. His only thought was to seek her, to the ends of the earth if need be, but to rest neither day nor night until he found her. He rose and quitted the house before any were astir.

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When his mother looked round for him at breakfast, John's seat stood empty, as also that prepared for the fair stranger. And soon it was noised abroad that both had disappeared in the night — returned doubtless to that mysterious land from which they had come.

The mother wept softly to herself for the beloved son whom she might never see again; but the father and brothers agreed that John was, after all, a sadly moon-struck fellow, and not a bit of good on the farm.

Thorgerd said nothing. Her heart seemed turned to stone with disappointed love.

CHAPTER IV

JOHNSON meanwhile wandered forth on that cold winter's morning, desolate and despairing. Whither to turn his steps he knew not. No faintest foot-print could he trace on the white snow, which lay deep all over the land.

Scarce knowing or caring which road he took, he wandered on and on, with heavy heart, until at last, as evening fell, he saw in the distance a long, narrow strip of silver, and he knew that he was near the sea. Farther on the twinkling lights of a little seaport town shone out of the darkness, and John, footsore and weary, sought rest at an inn for the night.

Next morning he inquired eagerly what ships were about to set sail. To his great disappointment he was told that none could leave the harbour till the great frost broke.

There was no help for it but to wait.

Morning after morning John woke up and gazed out wearily on that ice-bound coast, longing for the thaw. For now he felt that something drove him on, some urgent words which he seemed

once to have heard but was unable to recall, though he racked his brain for them day and night.

At length the morning dawned when a breath of spring blew over that northern land and the great frost broke.

New hope sprang up like a spring flower in poor John's weary heart. He bade farewell to the honest innkeeper, and filled his hands with gold, enough to pay the bill twice over. The good man wished him luck and a fair wind to fortune as John set sail in a stately ship bound for the English coast.

All that night he remained on deck. Not until the dawn began to creep slowly across the distant line where sky and sea meet did he fall asleep. And in his sleep he dreamed, but what he dreamed he knew not, only that on waking he found himself murmuring some words forgotten as soon as spoken. But with this short sleep had come a strange peace, his pain and weariness seemed almost gone.

The sun had not yet risen, but light was coming, and the moon showed pale and faint above the mast.

Suddenly with a swift, glorious flash the sun rose, flooding sky and sea with every shade of gold and rose-colour. And in that instant flashed a

light through John's dim mind. Clearly before him blazed out the words whose echo had haunted and troubled him so long —

“I go to that far distant land,
East of the sun, west of the moon.”

“O Love, my Love,” he cried, “would that thou couldst be glad this day, and forget the wretch who has lived but to make thee sad!”

To think of her banished to that far, lonely land, “the prison of untrustful love,” was terrible indeed! Yet, truth to tell, John did not quite mean it when he wished she might forget him could it but bring back peace and joy to her life. Perhaps he knew too well she could never again find peace or joy apart from him.

Henceforth his search began for this unknown land — “east of the sun, west of the moon.” He determined that nowhere would he rest till he beheld again the face of his lost Love.

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On landing in England John inquired wherever he went if any could tell him of the land he sought, but, though the English are great travellers, no man had as much as heard of the land “east of the sun, west of the moon.”

Some even laughed at him for starting on a fool's errand, saying they doubted if such a coun-

try existed, since they had never heard of it. But John was not to be disheartened, though all the world combined to dissuade him.

Far and wide he journeyed. North, south, east, and west, to every country known and unknown, inquiring of all men, wise and foolish alike, but, alas for him, finding no news of what he sought.

Then he let himself drift hither and thither on the winds of chance, hoping that fate would guide him to the land of his lost Love. But still in vain; no help, no hope came his sad and lonely way.

So the years passed and his youth fled. Nothing that happened now had power to interest or move him. Whether good or ill fortune came he greeted one and the other with unmoved face. He lost, he gained—he fell ill and got well—never content, never complaining, he drifted like a rudderless boat before the wind.

Once in his wanderings to and fro upon the earth he found himself again in his native country. Once again he crossed the threshold of his home and heard his father's welcome. But all unmoved by joy or sorrow he sat amongst them and even noted his mother's vacant chair without so much as a dimmed eye. No pain or loss had power any longer to touch him.

Thorgerd was then looking still young and fair, but he was old, and changed so greatly none would have known his face.

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Bidding a last farewell to the home of his youth again he wandered forth on his hopeless quest. Many a time did he rush into danger, risking his life recklessly, so he might end it all for ever. But death came not, and wherever he went he seemed to bear a charmed life.

One day he took ship, and for the second time sailed to the East. Crossing the Indian sea he landed at last in a strange city, where he heard and saw many great marvels. One day while here he met a company of merchants about to start on an exploring voyage to a land reported rich in gold and gems. John, careless where he went, if only to some new country, joined himself to these men.

For weeks they sailed, but no land came in sight. The skipper and first mate began to cast anxious looks at one another. They studied their charts in sore perplexity and changed the vessel's course, but still no sign of land appeared. At last, not a man on board but began to fear the worst, they were lost at sea. Among them all, John alone remained calm and indifferent.

One night as he stood on deck, gazing up at the clear, full moon, those words, "west of the

moon," seemed to ring in his ear with sudden distinctness.

What could it mean? Grown old and weary in his vain search he dared not even think of hope.

The sailors on deck were talking in low, anxious tones. They looked at the sky, where in the distance loomed a bank of storm-clouds.

That night all kept anxious watch save John. By the mast he lay down and slept peacefully, more peacefully than for years past. And in his sleep he dreamed a wondrous dream of how his Beloved came towards him, clothed in a robe of green with roses in her hair — her feet among the meadow flowers, her arms stretched out to greet him. But as he would have gone to her a sudden thick mist, cold as death, rose up between them, and he fell back into darkness.

With a crash overhead as of falling forest trees he awoke, flung violently against the mast. The storm was shrieking around him, wind and waves in one great uproar; the blackness of the night broken only by sudden gleams of angry lightning.

John clung to the mast. The salt waves dashed over him with fury. Whether the rest of the crew had perished, or if they like himself held on to the fast-breaking ship, he could not tell. How long he tossed on that wild sea through that wild night

he never knew. Time seemed to have ceased as he was swept ever on and on in that seething turmoil. Then by-and-by there came to him sweet dreams and fancies, again he lived with his Beloved through each day of bliss, and his soul sank to rest in a sea of light and peace, unconscious of the shrieking tempest.

CHAPTER V

JOHN awoke to find himself lying on the shining yellow sand. The morning sun had dried his wet clothes and its warm rays sent new life and heat through his stiff limbs.

He stood up and looked around on the bay and out across the wide ocean. No sign of the ship or her crew could be seen — not so much as a trace of broken spar or sail. Had every man perished in that fearful wreck, he wondered!

The air was cool and fresh, quite unlike the burning heat of India.

And now he looked at the green hillsides and grassy slopes, and saw to his amazement that this was no Indian coast, but more like his own familiar land of the North.

The sea-birds sailing overhead were those he had known in his youth, and the sand at his feet contained the shells and seaweeds of the north country.

John felt as in a dream — a strange and happy dream. He turned from the sea and wended his way up the hillside. Presently to his joy he came

to an orchard. Tempting apple-trees hung their branches over the wayside, laden with fruit. John waited for no man to invite him, but plucked the rosy apples with a thankful heart and never enjoyed a breakfast more thoroughly.

Resting there awhile he noticed with surprise that in this land spring flowers and autumn fruits blossomed and ripened all at the same time, so that it was impossible to guess what season it could be. Roses, lilies, violets, and primroses showed their sweet blossoms, while at the same time golden apples ripened on the boughs overhead.

Refreshed and rested, John went on his way. On reaching the summit he looked down into a lovely valley, rich with cornfields, orchards, and shady pine-woods. Farm-houses and homesteads rose on either side, and a river wound its way like a silver snake through the midst. In the distance, half hidden by trees, John saw what looked to him like a fairy palace, its white dome and turrets gleaming in the morning sun.

Now as he came down the hillside he passed a group of men and women setting out on their daily work. They were well clothed and fair to look upon, but to his surprise when he greeted them they passed by without a sign, as though they neither heard nor saw him. Their faces looked joyless and cold, nor did John hear one sound

pass their lips to one another. This strange thing sent a chill to his heart.

Again and again as he passed on his way John tried to make some one speak to him. He called to a tall, fine forester, hewing timber near a wood, and begged him to tell what land this might be to which he had come. A child stood by his side, and John walked close up to them, but they never so much as raised their eyes.

An old woman passed him, riding a mule led by a lad, and these also he spoke to, but with no better success. He might have been a shadow on the road for all they heeded him.

Downcast and lonely, John went on his way towards the shining house, which, as he neared, he saw to be indeed a perfect fairy palace, the most beautiful he had ever beheld in all his travels.

In the midst of one of the court-yards a fountain rose like a crystal tree, and round its marble basin maidens came and went, filling their water-jars. But in dreary silence they moved, with never a word or smile to show they were conscious of one another's presence, far less of John as he passed by. He made his way through the great palace doors. None attempted to stop him, though he pushed past armed guards and serving-men and courtiers without number. Every one,

in a dreary, dead-alive way, seemed busy and intent on his own affairs.

In the great banqueting-hall a sumptuous feast was going on. John strode up to a vacant seat, and, sitting down among the solemn, magnificent guests, made a hearty meal. And as he looked round on the silent company in their silks and embroideries, and then at his own travel-stained, sea-soaked garments, he burst into a loud, reckless laugh which echoed through the hall; but no one even turned to look at the intruder.

Disheartened and depressed, he rose and left the feast. A restless longing urged him on. Through halls and corridors he passed until he came at length to a long gallery, at the end of which was a carved oak door. Here he paused, holding his breath with a sudden feeling of hope and fear. Then he lifted the latch and entered. A sweet scent as of spring flowers greeted him, and the sound of humming spinning-wheels met his ear. It was a long, low room, where the light entered softly. He paused on the threshold, then raised his eyes and gave a cry of joy, for there at length his eyes beheld her — his Beloved. After all the weary years found again!

In the midst of her maidens she sat, holding a piece of fine work, with which her hands played idly. Very sad and tired was the look on her

pale, sweet face. John's heart ached to see it, even in the midst of his joy, which was so great that all his strength seemed to leave him. Scarcely could his tottering steps guide him to her feet, where he knelt, taking her hands in his, and, lifting his face, pressed his lips to hers. But, like one fast bound in sleep, she looked on him, neither seeing him nor hearing his words of love.

A great fear seized John that after all he had found his Love in vain ; that only her outward form was here, and the spirit, sunk in the deathly sleep of hopeless grief, had lost the power to wake again to love and life.

Then in his despair a thought came to him, and at her feet he began to tell the long tale of his love from the first day when he saw her dancing in the southern meadow. In a low voice he recalled all the tender words and happy hours which followed that first meeting, all the sad, lonely years he had sought her since the fatal night when she left him. And, as he spoke of his anguish and grief, she looked round uneasily, as though searching for some forgotten thought. Her maidens spun on unheeding ; round and round went their wheels, like the wheels of the Fates, and though the roof had fallen they would have spun on still.

Then John came to that part of his story when

he remembered in a flash the words she had spoken as he slept. And, as he repeated those words,

“I go to that far distant Land,
East of the sun, west of the moon,”

with a great sigh, as though casting off a heavy burden, she rose and looked on him. The spell was broken. She saw him at last, her Love so long awaited. With a cry of joy they fell into each other's arms. The Lover and his Beloved had found each other at last, never more to part in this world.

And as the mighty sun wakes with his warm kiss the sleeping world, making the icicles to thaw and flushing the cold snow-peaks rosy red, so this triumphant love sent forth its strong, healing rays and woke with a magic touch each lonely, lifeless heart in that far land. Lovers grown grey and hopeless woke with deep-drawn sighs. Looking into each other's eyes they wept warm, healing tears, like those who after years in a dark dungeon find themselves in the free sunlight, and can scarcely believe for joy. And whoever looked on such an awakened pair in their turn felt the healing ray, so that before long throughout the length and breadth of the land rang a song of joy and thanksgiving.

The Fair Maid of Astolat



The Fair Maid of Astolat

CHAPTER I

IN the days of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table there dwelt at Astolat, about a day's journey from Camelot, a fair and noble maiden called Elaine.

She lived with her father, Sir Bernard, the worthy Baron of Astolat, and her two brothers, Tirre and Lavaine, both of whom though young had won their spurs, and, to the pride and joy of their sister, had been made Knights.

Elaine was tall, and fair as the white lilies in her garden. Many there were who would gladly have been her lovers, but she held herself always proudly and distantly, and gave no man among them a second thought. They called her Elaine the White, and many declared she was like the white peaks whose snow covers a heart of rock.

But the truth was, Elaine loved a Knight, far nobler and braver and handsomer than any who had come to woo her. A Knight of her dreams,

both day-dreams and night-dreams, but whom as yet she had never seen. "Somewhere he lives," said Elaine to herself, "and some day he will come, and then my heart will go out to meet him."

One day, news came that the King had proclaimed a grand tournament, to take place at Camelot on the feast of Our Lady. For years there had been no such great and noble assembly. King Arthur announced that he and the King of Scots would with their following joust against all the world that came against them, and the challenge had been taken up eagerly by all the Kings and Dukes of the surrounding countries. The King of the North-gales, King Anguish of Ireland, the King of Northumberland, and a host of famous Dukes, Earls, and Barons, besides some of the noblest Knights of the world, all hurried to Camelot.

Elaine's two brothers longed greatly to enter the lists also, but Sir Tirre had been wounded in his first tilt and was not yet recovered enough to sit a horse, while the younger, Sir Lavaine, was too untried and unknown to go except in the train of some great Knight.

Now Astolat was on the road between London and Camelot, so it happened that the King and a large party of his Knights here broke their

journey, and lodged in a castle not far from that of Sir Bernard.

That same evening there rode up to the old Baron's castle a noble-looking horseman, with shield, helmet, and armour which shone like silver in the slanting rays of the sun. Dismounting, he craved the hospitality of the Lord of Astolat. Gladly the old Knight welcomed him and begged to know who his guest might be, for said he, "I can see ye are a noble Knight indeed."

But the stranger begged to be allowed to keep his name a secret until he returned from the jousts at Camelot, his wish being to go to the tournament in disguise. And for that reason he begged his courteous host to lend him a shield that would not be recognised, his own being too well known.

Sir Bernard hastened to assure him that the very thing he desired was at his service, for his son, Sir Tirre, had a plain white shield, with as yet no device or arms upon it, which on account of his wound he was unable to use. And he begged the Knight to allow his younger son, Sir Lavaine, a goodly youth and strong, to accompany him to the jousts, the boy's heart being greatly set upon it. To this the Knight gladly agreed.

So, the matter being happily settled, Sir Bernard

invited his guest to take off his armour and join the rest of the family.

It was not an infrequent thing for Knights and travellers to beg the hospitality of the Lord of Astolat, for, though living what he called a hermit's life, his gates were always open, according to the courteous custom of those days. Elaine heard with indifference that a strange Knight had arrived. But no sooner did she behold the dark stranger who entered the banqueting hall with her father than her heart gave a bound. "It is he," she cried to herself; "my Knight long awaited."

The stranger Knight was not young. His proud, melancholy face was furrowed by many a line of weariness and care, and a deep scar ran across his brow. His dark, sad eyes told that he had drunk deep of life and tasted its bitterness. But for all that, Elaine saw in him the handsomest, noblest Knight in the world. Just as he was she loved him, and would not have had him a day younger or with one furrow less.

Never had her father and brothers seen Elaine so gay and joyous as that evening. Her beauty seemed transfigured; it was as though the morning sun had kissed the snow-peak into rosy, smiling life. But with the same unconsciousness as the morning sun the stranger Knight bestowed his kindly, courteous glance on Elaine and her brothers

alike. She was to him only a fair, sweet maiden, of whom he thought no more than of the fair, sweet flowers in the castle garden. Still, since sweet flowers are pleasant to look on, the Knight passed a merry evening and had good cheer. The old Baron asked for news of the court, of King Arthur and his Knights, and Lavaine listened with glowing eyes as their guest told of the knightly deeds and noble deaths of many of his companions of the Round Table. The heart of Lavaine went out to this Knight of the melancholy eyes, even with the same worship and love as his sister Elaine. He longed to follow him, whoever he might be, to the end of the world.

Sir Tirre alone resisted the spell; his love for his sister made him foreboding and anxious. Not that he mistrusted the unknown Knight, for the soul within had written itself plainly on his face as one of rare nobility. But Sir Tirre felt ill at ease, and the more so when he heard his sister beg their guest to wear a token of hers at the coming tournament, — Elaine, who never in her life had stepped down from the heights of her maidenly reserve to ask anything of any man.

The stranger Knight replied courteously that never had he worn the token of any lady or damosel, such being, as all knew, against his custom.

"Then, Sir Knight, if you grant now my request, the better will be the disguise you desire," said Elaine.

The Knight looked at the fair, sweet face and felt it hard indeed to refuse her anything ; besides, what she said was true, his disguise would be the more complete. So he answered :

"Fair damosel, I will wear your token ; bring it me. But know that I do for you what I have never done before in all my life for any lady."

That he should do for her what he had done for no other caused Elaine the greater joy. She did not know that her hero's heart had, alas, long been fast enchained by a secret love, and the tokens his lady gave him he must needs keep carefully from the eye of the world.

With a radiant face she brought her token, a scarlet sleeve embroidered all over with great white pearls.

"I will wear it on my helmet," said the Knight. "And I pray you, fair maiden, in return to keep for me my shield till I come back again."

Had he given her his heart it could not have been to Elaine a more sacred trust. To keep that shield from a scratch or a dent she would have shed her heart's blood.

For three days the stranger Knight remained a guest at Astolat, waiting till the King and his

Knights should set forth for Camelot. Then so soon as he heard they were well started he and the young Lavaine bade farewell to the old Baron, his son and daughter, and followed after the royal party.

Elaine from her tower watched till the scarlet sleeve on the glittering helmet of her Knight became a speck in the distance, and then vanished with the rider out of her sight. Greatly she envied Lavaine her brother. To ride by his side, to hear his voice, to look on his face day by day, what would she not give! Before he was yet an hour gone her soul longed wearily for his return. How could she bear the weight of those blank, empty days without him?

One consolation Elaine had, and for that she thanked heaven every hour of the day. Long hours together she sat and gazed at the shield. It became to her a precious companion, she spoke to it as she could not have spoken to any friend; for did not the shield know all about her Knight, had it not been with him and guarded him through all the peril of battles and adventures. Elaine pictured those scenes to herself, as looking on the shield it seemed to speak to her in every mark it bore of the thrilling and wonderful past of her unknown hero. On it was emblazoned his coat-of-arms; he had said that device was too well known

if he would enter the lists in disguise. Often Elaine wondered what was the name of her Knight. She lived so secluded a life at Astolat that the great Knights of Arthur's Round Table were but names to her, though some were written in her memory in letters of gold, above all, those who had gone on the quest of the Holy Grail, such as Sir Percival, Sir Galahad, Sir Bors, and Sir Launcelot.

But, whatever his name who bore this shield, he was for Elaine the one peerless Knight in all Christendom; none other was worthy to hold his stirrup. She knew that he did not give her his love, though he wore her token on his helmet and spoke to her with such gentle courtesy. But, whether he loved her or loved her not, Elaine felt she needs must love him, and no other, so long as she lived. No more than a flower can help turning its face to the sun could she help loving this noble Knight.

Elaine embroidered a cover for the shield. All day she worked at it. It was wrought in finest threads of gold on a scarlet ground like the sleeve, and was a wondrously beautiful piece of needlework. But the shield was only covered when Elaine could not bear it company. At night it stood by her window, that the rays of the moonlight might show it as the last thing before she slept, and its glitter in the morning sun be the first thing to awaken her.

So the days went by, till even the old Baron, who was of a most patient nature, began to wonder when he would hear news of his boy Lavaine and the Knight with whom he had ridden forth.

Elaine meanwhile during those long days dwelt in her tower, where she could watch the road to Camelot. She was waiting and watching and wondering always how they fared.

Sir Tirre watched his sister and wondered and waited, but with a sadness at his heart he could not dispel. His wound was healing and no longer needed so much of her care, and he felt Elaine had travelled a long way from him with her Knight's shield.

One day she saw from her tower a glittering company of horsemen. With the King in their midst they rode down the road from Camelot; but in vain did she seek for Lavaine or the Knight with her token in his helmet. They halted for the night at Astolat, and the heart of Elaine beat fast as she heard a horseman ride up to the castle-gate and ask admittance. It was a Knight of King Arthur's party, Sir Gawain by name. Eagerly the Lord of Astolat welcomed him and asked what tidings and who did best at the tournament.

"There were two unknown Knights with white shields," answered Sir Gawain; "and one, who wore on his helmet a red sleeve, was the best I

ever saw joust in a field! He overthrew forty Knights of the Table Round, and his companion also did manfully."

Elaine listened with shining eyes. "Thank God," she said, "that the Knight with the red sleeve fared so well—it was my token that he wore."

"Is that indeed so, fair damosel?" said Sir Gawain, astonished. "Is that noble Knight your love? Then you know his name?"

"He is indeed my love," Elaine answered proudly and without faltering. "God knows he is the only man I have ever loved—the first and the last—but for all that I do not know his name!"

"How did you first know this Knight?" asked Gawain in perplexity. Then Elaine and her father told how the stranger Knight had sought their hospitality and had borrowed the shield of Sir Tirre that he might not be recognised, leaving his own in the care of Elaine.

"He has left here his shield? Ah!" cried Sir Gawain, "I pray you, fair damsel, to let me see it, for the King has sent to seek him far and near, but since the jousts no man can find him."

So the shield was sent for and carefully uncovered.

Then great was the astonishment of Sir Gawain.

"Is he indeed your love who owns this shield, fair maiden?" he asked.

"Truly he is my love — would God I were his love," added Elaine sadly.

The gallant Knight looked at her in wonder. Truly this was no lady of the court, such as he was used to. Love did not come to them in such guise. This fair maid of Astolat gloried not in the love that she received, but in that she gave. It was a passing strange affair, thought the gallant courtier. Yet, after all, was she not right, a woman who could love like this to glory in giving her love to the best? So he answered with an unwonted reverence in his tone:

"God grant, fair damsel, that a day may come when ye shall rejoice each other, for, though more than twenty years I have known this Knight, yet never have I seen him wear the token of any lady, so truly you are greatly favoured. And you are right in that you love the most honourable, worshipful Knight in the world, for he you love is none other than the noble Knight, Sir Launcelot. By this shield I know him!"

"Sir Launcelot du Lake!" cried the old Baron and his son. The great Knight's name and heroic deeds were long familiar to them both. The Baron rejoiced to think he had entertained such a guest.

"Sir Launcelot!" repeated Elaine. "I knew always that he I loved was the noblest and best of all Knights in the world."

"But alas!" went on Gawain, "I fear me, fair damsel, that he is grievously wounded and more like to die than to live."

At these words it seemed to Elaine as if the sun were suddenly darkened. "Is he slain?" she asked faintly.

"Nay, I said not so," answered Gawain. "But that his wound is grievous I know from the Knight who gave him the wound. And that man was Sir Bors, who of all men in the world loves Launcelot best. When he hears this 't will be the worst sorrow ever came to his heart."

Then Elaine turned to her father and implored him for the love he bore her to let her depart at once and seek till she found Sir Launcelot and her brother Lavaine, for she said, "Till I find them I can know no rest or peace."

Never in his life had the Lord of Astolat said nay to his beloved Elaine, and this was certainly not a moment when he felt the courage to begin.

Sir Tirre, wounded as he was, would fain have gone with his sister, but that she would not allow, saying she must hasten with such speed as would be quite impossible in his wounded condition.

So they sent with her some trusted servants, and

Elaine made ready and departed for Camelot without delay. For Sir Gawain had said, "It is impossible but that they are near that place, though hitherto we have sought them in vain. The wound of Sir Launcelot was too grave to permit him to ride far."

When Elaine reached Camelot she made enquiries everywhere for the two Knights, but no tidings could she hear. So turning away from the city she rode to that field where the jousts had taken place, and from there looking round the country she prayed heaven guide her steps to her beloved Knight and her brother. "Since they disappeared so soon after the tournament it must be they went to the woods yonder," thought Elaine, and turned her horse in that direction. And as she neared the wood there came out a horseman and galloped his horse backward and forward on the outskirts of the wood. Elaine rode towards him. Presently she gave a glad cry and called to the rider, "Lavaine! Lavaine!" The horseman pulled up, and great was Lavaine's astonishment to see there his fair sister and her servants.

It was a glad meeting, and Elaine felt she could sing aloud for joy when Lavaine told her Sir Launcelot's wound was mending, though still too grievous for him to move.

"But how," he asked, "comes it that you know my Lord's name? It is a secret from all save me alone and the hermit Knight where he is lodged."

Then Elaine told her brother about Sir Gawain and the shield, and how King Arthur and his Knights had all been seeking high and low for the great Knight who had won the prize at the tournament. And Elaine said how she had come to nurse Sir Launcelot of his wound, and would die of grief if she were not allowed to do so.

Lavaine had no heart to refuse her, so they sent back the servants, bidding them tell everything to Sir Bernard and Sir Tirre, for both they knew were awaiting news with great anxiety. "And tell my father," said Elaine, "that so soon as the Knight is able to bear the journey we will all return to Astolat."

As they rode together through the wood Elaine made her brother tell her of the tournament and the wonderful feats of Sir Launcelot. To speak of his Lord gave Lavaine as great joy as it did Elaine to hear.

"'Twas a wondrous sight to see him," said Lavaine, "after Sir Bors had dealt him such a blow that the spear brake and the head was left in his side, how he mounted again on his horse and smote them such buffets that Sir Bors, Sir Ector, and Sir Lionel, all three, were at his

mercy. Such a deed of arms was never seen or heard of. But when the Kings of Northgales and Northumberland and they all came around to thank my Lord, and bring him to receive the prize, he begged them to suffer him to depart while he might, for his wound was like to be his death. So we rode with all speed to this wood, and there he begged me as I loved him to draw the spear out of his side, the agony of it being so sore. I promise you I was in mighty dread that by so doing I might slay him," and the young Knight shuddered at the thought of that moment. "After I had done as he bade he groaned and swooned away."

Elaine turned pale as she listened. "Alas, my fair, sweet Lord, how he must have suffered," she murmured. "O happy Lavaine! to have been able to help and succour him."

Then Lavaine told how so soon as he was able to move he had placed Sir Launcelot on his horse, and they rode on to where lived a hermit of those parts, known in former days to Sir Launcelot. This hermit was learned as a surgeon and a leech, and had once been a rich and noble Knight, but was now vowed to a life of poverty and good works. He took in the two Knights and tended the wound of Sir Launcelot with such skill that he certainly saved his life. It was he who, recognising the

wounded Knight as the famous Sir Launcelot, had told Lavaine his name.

"I knew from the first that my Lord was the greatest Knight in all the world, whoever he might be," said Lavaine proudly.

"And I too, in that first moment I saw him," said Elaine; "the greatest, the noblest, and the best."

"I will follow no other so long as I live. I would die for him," said the young Knight.

"I too," said Elaine in a lower voice.

By this time they came to the dwelling of the hermit. It was built into a great cliff and overhung with trees so that one might easily pass by without seeing it.

Elaine entered softly with Lavaine, but when she saw her noble Knight lying pale and gaunt and immovable upon his bed she uttered a cry and would have fallen to the ground had not Lavaine upheld her.

But Sir Launcelot was not dead, as she had feared, for hearing her cry he turned and opened his great, dark eyes with a look of wonder.

Then Elaine went up to him and knelt by his bedside, the tears raining down her pale cheeks as she sobbed, "Alas, my Lord Sir Launcelot, that you should be so grievously hurt."

The wounded Knight looked on her with his sad, kind eyes, which seemed to have grown twice as

big as before. "Fair damsel, you must not weep and grow pale for me! If you are come to cheer and comfort me you are right welcome, but your tears give me pain. I shall soon be well of this little hurt."

So saying he took her pale face between his hands and kissed her on the forehead tenderly, as he would have kissed a child. He wondered why the sweet face, which had been white as a lily, suddenly became red as a rose.

From that time Elaine nursed Sir Launcelot night and day. She and the old hermit soon became fast friends. He declared that without her help he never could have saved the wounded Knight, for Sir Launcelot's wound was more grave than Lavaine had known, and there were days when the hermit feared that all his skill could not avail.

But Elaine never wearied, her strength never failed. She was miserable if they sent her away to rest, knowing no peace till she was again at her post; but by his side she was happy, and her bright presence would cheer Sir Launcelot when pain and weariness made him sad. And there were times when Sir Launcelot was weighed down with so great sadness that whether he lived or died he hardly seemed to care.

Elaine told him how she came to know his

name and of the visit of Sir Gawain. When Sir Launcelot heard that Gawain knew by his shield he was the Knight who wore the red sleeve he was greatly troubled. Elaine often wondered why the matter so disturbed him. She did not know that Sir Launcelot's secret love was his secret grief, and that he dreaded Some-One should hear of that red sleeve and misunderstand how he came to wear it.

One day Sir Lavaine returned from his morning ride, bringing with him a Knight to visit Sir Launcelot. When the wounded man perceived who it was had come to see him he held out both hands in greeting and laughed aloud for very joy. But the Knight, at sight of Sir Launcelot, knelt down by his side and wept as sorely as had Elaine. For this was no other than Sir Bors de Ganis, the Knight whose spear had so nearly taken Sir Launcelot's life.

"Alas, my Lord Sir Launcelot," he cried, "that I who loved you of all men most should have had the misfortune to do such grievous hurt to you, our leader, our best and noblest! The curse of God must be upon me. And you, when you might have slain me, spared me. By that deed I might have known you Launcelot and no other."

And so he would have gone on reproaching himself, but Sir Launcelot begged him cease, saying such words pained him and spoiled the joy he had

in seeing him. "For, indeed," he said, "it was by my own fault I got this wound. In my pride I went disguised and fought, desiring to overcome you all. But now let us rejoice together that we are so well met, for soon I shall be whole again."

Then Sir Bors gave Sir Launcelot news of the court, and the King and Queen, and all he desired most to know. And, speaking in a low voice that no one else might hear, he told how Some One had heard through Sir Gawain of the scarlet sleeve he wore at the tournament, and was in great wrath about it. For Sir Bors was the one friend who knew Sir Launcelot's secret.

Elaine passing to and fro looked anxiously at her patient as she noted the shadow on his face. "Is that she men call the 'fair maid of Astolat,'" asked Sir Bors, "who tends and cares for you so well?"

"Aye," said Sir Launcelot; and thinking of that One whose wrath he had incurred he added, with a sigh, "She would by no means go from me."

Sir Bors laughed. "Why should she go from you? Perhaps it were well for you could you love so sweet and fair a damsel, for I see she loves you right well."

Sir Launcelot sighed again. "It is not of my will that she loves me," he answered.

For a month Sir Bors came every day to see Sir Launcelot, and he, like the hermit, said that never had he seen a man receive more tender care than the fair Elaine gave her patient.

She knew always the right thing to do, and never did the wrong one. She might have been a spirit moving about him, so noiseless was her step; and so bright and fresh her presence, it cheered like spring flowers.

Now Sir Bors had told Sir Launcelot how there was to be another tournament upon All Hallows' Day, at Camelot, between King Arthur and the King of Northgales, and the wounded Knight made up his mind that he would be well at all costs by that time. With the aid of Sir Bors and Sir Lavaine he determined one day therefore to get up and try his strength. Knowing full well that neither the old hermit nor the fair Elaine would consent to such a rash act they invented a plea to get rid of them and with great deceit pretending there were some herbs Sir Launcelot much desired for a plaster, begged they would go and seek them at some distance in the forest.

No sooner were doctor and nurse safe out of the way than these foolish Knights set about to carry out their plan. Sir Launcelot rose and arrayed himself as if for the fray, in complete armour, helmet, greaves, spear. Then Lavaine

brought out his horse, a noble charger of fiery spirit, and with great difficulty Sir Bors assisted him to mount.

Now Sir Launcelot's horse had not been exercised for full a month, and so great was his joy to feel his master on his back once more that at the first touch of the spurs he leaped up like a rocket. Sir Launcelot couched his spear, and with all his strength urged his horse forward. But the strain was too much for him, in a moment his wound burst open afresh, and with great loss of blood he fell like one dead to the ground.

Sir Bors and Sir Lavaine rushed to his help, but great was their woe and their dismay when they found him apparently lifeless.

Fortunately just then Elaine and the hermit, not liking to be long away, happened to pass near, and [hearing their cries for help Elaine hurried forward. Her despair and grief at what she saw cannot be described. She knelt by Sir Launcelot and bathed his pale face with water from the stream, kissing him and weeping over him by turns. "False friends, traitors that ye are, it is ye have killed him," she cried to Sir Bors and her brother.

And the Knights, feeling the justice of her reproach, made but sorry figures as they stood looking down on the lifeless form of their hero.

Then when the hermit came up and saw Sir Launcelot he gave a look at the two Knights which said even more than poor Elaine's bitter words.

"Carry him in, unarm him, and lay him on his bed," he ordered.

It was no easy task, but this holy hermit had more skill than ten doctors put together, so in the end he brought Sir Launcelot back to life and staunched his wound.

Never were two men more ashamed of their rash, foolish deed than Sir Bors and Sir Lavaine, and they showed such repentance that in the end Elaine must needs pardon them, especially when Sir Launcelot opened his eyes once more.

The hermit reproached Sir Launcelot greatly for his act of folly in so jeopardising his life, but Elaine spoke no word, only she looked on him with eyes which said plainly she would not again trust a life so precious in anyone's charge but her own. And Sir Launcelot, reading her thought, sighed, his thoughts flying to that other One.

Sir Launcelot's recovery, though delayed many weeks by this accident, was complete at last, and the day came when they all took affectionate leave of the good old hermit.

To Elaine it was a sad day indeed, and her tears fell fast as the old man blessed her and wished them all God-speed.

Those happy days were over when she could see her Knight every hour, wait upon him, care for him, and feel he needed her. What did the future hold for her, Elaine asked herself, as they rode back to Astolat, and the towers of her father's castle came in sight? The old life at Astolat she could never live again. The Elaine of former days was gone, and this Elaine could live no life without her Knight. There was not a thought or a wish that did not begin and end with him, and so it would be always, Elaine felt, to the end of her life; no other could she ever love. There are some plants which strike downwards as well as upwards, and these you cannot root up and transfer to other gardens. If you meddle with the roots the plant dies.

The old Lord of Astolat was overjoyed at their return, and welcomed them back with much good cheer that evening. But on the morrow Sir Launcelot declared he must depart.

When Elaine heard this it seemed to her as though her death sentence had been said. Then she went to Sir Launcelot and told him plainly that if he would go and leave her thus she could not live, for her heart would break.

Sir Launcelot answered gently there was nothing a true Knight might do for his lady that he would not do for her who had shown him such goodness

and tender care. Only marriage was not for him, for never would he marry anyone, but her true Knight and champion he would be to the end of his days.

"Then woe is me," cried Elaine; "if I may not be your love, my Lord Sir Launcelot, my life is done, for without you I cannot live."

"Nay, fair maiden, sweet Elaine, but you must live," said Sir Launcelot, "and love some noble Knight worthy of you, — younger than I, one who will love you as you deserve. If he is poor I will make him rich and give him the half of my lands for your sweet sake, that you may be happy together."

"Of all this I will nothing," answered Elaine; "and I beg you give me not such pain as to speak of money and lands — your words cut me to the heart. I have given to you the love of my whole soul; you and none other can I ever love."

"Alas, fair damsel, my heart is not mine to give," sighed Sir Launcelot, thinking of that other One.

Then Elaine knew that all hope was dead. And it seemed to her that night came suddenly and wrapped her round with black wings, and she tried to call to Launcelot to save her, and could not, for she fell forward into a dark gulf, down, down, till she knew no more.

When she came to herself Elaine found she was

in her own room. She looked round for the shield, but it was gone, the cover lay there empty.

Her father and brother came to her, begging to know how she was. Her father took her hand and stroked it, Tirre's eyes were dim with unwonted tears.

"Is he gone?" asked Elaine in a low, faint voice, which seemed to her to belong to some one else.

"He is gone," answered Sir Tirre.

"And Lavaine?" she asked again.

"Lavaine too," answered her father. "He begged Sir Launcelot to let him go with him, for he said his love for him was even as yours, and he would follow him to the death."

"Happy Lavaine — unhappy me," sighed Elaine.

He had gone without even a farewell — gone while she lay as one dead. Oh, cruel Beloved! When he lay ill and sad she tended him night and day, she would have died to have saved him one wound or hurt, and he had not even bade her farewell!

Elaine did not know that her father had urged Sir Launcelot to depart speedily to spare her the pain of final leave-taking. "Since you cannot love her, Sir Knight, as she loves you, best to go quickly; and, if she thinks the worse of you for

such discourtesy, then the happier for my poor child."

So Sir Launcelot with a heavy heart bade the kindly old Baron and Sir Tirre farewell, assuring them of his sorrow at being the cause of grief to one so sweet and lovely, and with Lavaine departed for the court of King Arthur.

Day by day Elaine drooped and faded. She neither ate nor drank nor slept. Sorrow seemed to choke her, and at night sleep forsook her. The tower-room became peopled with forms of Launcelot. Now he was jousting with the red sleeve in his helmet; now he lay in the wood, pale and lifeless, while she bathed his face from the stream and kissed him, weeping as though her heart would break. And again he was riding away to Arthur's court, glorious in his restored strength and might, while all her heart cried after him.

Then Elaine would stretch out her arms in the darkness and moan aloud, "O Launcelot, my Beloved, would thou wert sick once more that I might tend thee! Would thou wert in danger that I might die for thee! Life without thee is worse than a thousand deaths. Oh, come, Death, kind Death, and welcome!"

And Death, merciful, kindly Angel, heard that beseeching call and drew near, daily nearer, for

he knew it came from one whom in very truth he alone could comfort and console.

Ten days had passed since Sir Launcelot rode away. Elaine had become a very ghost of that "fair maid of Astolat" who had been the light of her old father's eyes and the pride of her two brothers.

On the tenth day she asked for the priest that she might confess her sins and be shriven before she died. The priest bade her think no more of Sir Launcelot and leave all thoughts of earth. But Elaine answered the holy man that so long as she lived her love must endure, and, as to leaving such thoughts, how could she, an earthly woman, do better than love an earthly man, the noblest and best on God's earth.

The priest felt his rebuke had perhaps been mistaken. This "fair maid of Astolat" had little of earth about her now; and such a look lit up her eyes when she spoke of her earthly love the priest was not sure if after all he ought not rather to take off his shoes, as he trod on such holy ground.

Sir Bernard and Sir Tirre stood by her bedside weeping, but Elaine besought them not to mourn for her. She "needs must love the highest when she saw it," and to die for love of the noblest and best was better than to live for something less.

“And I pray you,” said Elaine to her father, “for the love you bear me, to grant me this last request. When I am dead dress me in my richest robes and let me be carried to the nearest place where Thames is and there lay me in a barge. I would go alone on this last journey; let only one faithful servitor steer the barge down the river to Westminster.”

Then of her brother, Sir Tirre, she begged that he would write for her a letter, the words of which she would tell him, and put the letter in her dead hand, sealed and directed to the most noble Knight, Sir Launcelot.

That same night the fair maid of Astolat lay white and still as one of her own lilies which they placed all about her. Death in answering her call had whispered some sweet secret to her departing spirit, for a smile was on her lips, and such a calm and peace upon her brow as seemed to crown her.

All was faithfully carried out as she desired. Robed in white samite, with her golden hair as a cloak about her, they laid her in the barge, and, with the faithful old servitor as steersman, the fair maid of Astolat floated down the river on that last journey, the letter clasped in her small white hand.

Now it so happened that King Arthur and his Queen stood by a window looking out on the

river, and presently the Queen noticed a great black barge moving slowly towards the palace, steered by one oarsman. And as it neared she called to the King to look at the strange sight, for there lay one asleep, it seemed, all white and gold, in the mournful barge.

The King called to his seneschal, Sir Kay, and bade him go down to the river and see what it meant. Sir Kay with other noble Knights returned and told the King there was a maiden exceeding fair, lying dead in the barge, and an old man who seemed carved out of stone, for no word did he speak and no sign of life did he make save the slow movement of the oars.

Then the King, turning to the Queen, said, "Let us come and see this fair corpse."

So they went together, and, ordering the barge to be made fast, stepped on to the deck. There they beheld the fairest sight that ever death had shown them. "Does she sleep, or is this truly death?" exclaimed the King. "So sweet and lovely, with that smile upon her lips!"

The Queen bent over her curiously, as she would ask what secret the closed lips guarded. Suddenly she espied the letter.

"See," she cried, "she bears a letter! This will tell us what is the meaning of her coming thus."

Reverently the gentle King took the letter from

Elaine's dead hand, and, sending for a learned clerk, bade him read out what the letter said. This is what the clerk read, while the King and Queen and their courtiers stood round to listen:

"Most noble Knight, Sir Launcelot, I, whom once men called the fair maid of Astolat, come to take my last farewell of you, who was my love, though never was I yours. God is my witness, none other have I loved save you. And of my true love I die, therefore unto all ladies I make my moan. Yet pray for my soul at least, noble Sir Launcelot, pray for my soul and give me burial, as thou art peerless among all Knights. This is my last request."

When they heard this letter the King and Queen and all the Knights wept for pity of the sweet maiden, who lay there white and fair as the lily in her hand.

And Some One was there who understood full well how, having given her love to that noble knight, Sir Launcelot, she could never depart from it.

Then the King sent for Sir Launcelot, that he might hear the letter. And when Sir Launcelot arrived on the scene, followed by Lavaine, great was the sorrow and dismay of them both.

Sir Lavaine knelt down by his sister's side, weeping and lamenting her most piteous death. Sir Launcelot stooped and kissed her gently on the brow. He remembered how once before he

had so kissed her, and half expected the white lily face again to flush with rosy red, so living seemed the tender smile that played about her eyes and lips.

And he turned to the King and said, "My Lord King Arthur, most grieved am I for the death of this fair damsel. God knows I was not willingly the cause, and in that will her brother here uphold me. In truth, she loved me overwell—but love will not be bounden or constrained."

"That is truth," said the King; "love cannot be withholden, neither can it be constrained. Let it be your care, my Knight Sir Launcelot, that this fair maiden be interred with all honour."

So on the morrow they bore the fair maid of Astolat in great state, like a Queen, to her last resting-place. In accordance with the custom of him who was chief mourner Sir Launcelot offered her mass-penny, and every Knight of the Round Table offered also with him, each desiring greatly to do her honour, the King himself being present at the head of his order of noble Knights, besides the Queen and all the ladies of the court.

By order of King Arthur a beautiful tomb was made, and on it was carved the image of the maid of Astolat, with a lily in her hand and the shield of Launcelot at her feet. And inscribed

in letters of gold was the history of her sad voyage, and how she died because of her great love.

And there before her tomb would often kneel the Knight for whose sake she died, praying, in accordance with her last request, for the soul of the "fair maid of Astolat."

Sâvitri—The Faithful Wife



Sâvitri—The Faithful Wife

LONG, long before any history books begin their story, there lived in the far east a great King, Āswapati by name. He reigned over the kingdom of Madras wisely and well, and under him all were prosperous and happy.

But the King himself had one great sorrow. The gods gave him no children. For sixteen years he fasted and prayed at all the appointed times, paid his dues and sacrifices, and gave many gifts to the poor and needy.

One day, in the temple of the great goddess Sâvitri, at whose shrine he faithfully worshipped, there appeared, rising out of the flames on the altar, a shining form of such brightness his eyes were at first dazzled.

It was the radiant goddess Sâvitri herself.

"Ask what thou wilt," she said, "and I will grant it as a reward for thy long and faithful service."

And Āswapati, seeing her smile graciously upon him, felt no fear, but joyful wonder only.

"Grant me a child, O gracious goddess," he replied promptly, this one wish being ever present in his mind.

"Thou shalt have a daughter, the sweetest and fairest of any on earth, better than many sons. Such is the will of the Great Father, whose messenger I am," answered the goddess, and then vanished from sight.

Aswapati returned to his palace rejoicing, and in due time a little daughter was born, whom he called Sâvitri, after the goddess.

As she grew up all the promises of the goddess were fulfilled concerning her. Even when a little child she loved the temples and shrines of the great gods, and especially that of her own goddess, whose shrine she kept always fresh with flowers. And she sang the hymns of praise and thanksgiving in a voice so sweet that at the sound of it the nightingale himself would hush his evening song to listen, and hard, cold hearts would melt like ice in the warm sunshine.

Her mother died while Sâvitri was very young, and so it happened she was constantly with the King her father, and indeed he could scarcely bear to have her out of his sight. Sâvitri grew up so fair and good it seemed as if a heavenly light surrounded her and no evil could live in her presence. Far and near all men praised this fair maiden for

her goodness and beauty, but none among them came forward to woo her as a bride, for goodness will often keep men at greater distance than wickedness.

Then Āswapati, seeing how matters stood, and since according to the law the Princess must wed, determined she should herself choose her husband, and he swore by his royal sceptre that he would abide her choice, on whomsoever it might fall.

So together they set forth, the King and his fair young daughter Sâvitrî, on a voyage round the world, riding in a golden car drawn by milk-white steeds. From one land to another they passed, visiting those princes most renowned for their wisdom and goodness. And in every spot where dwelt holy Brahmans they descended and paid homage and made sacrifice to the gods. *

One day journeying through a mighty forest they came to a court unlike all others they had seen. Here was a King without a kingdom, a King without a crown. For royal palace he had the great trees which arched overhead, for throne the trunk of an ancient Sal, and for footstool a mat of rushes. His food was the wild fruits of the wood, his wine the clear water from the brook. Together with his wife and son he lived a lonely hermit life, spending his days chiefly in prayer and meditation,

for he was blind, and so was cut off from the active life of his son.

The young Satyavân loved the free, wild life of the forest, hunting, fishing, and hewing wood. He had no remembrance of the past glory and honour of his house, for he had been only a young child when his father was betrayed and banished from his kingdom, but he would often dream of the day when he should restore his father to his rights and set him on his throne again.

Not so the King Dyumutsena. Whether in the palace or in the lonely forest he was content and at peace. Even blindness could not darken the light that shone so steadfast in his soul.

"All things the gods send are for the good of man," he was wont to say. "Satyavân my son is to me both eyes and feet."

Now when the Princess Sâvitri driving past saw the young Prince by the blind King's side, his strong arm tenderly guiding his father's uncertain steps, she looked on him and loved him.

"That Prince and no other will I wed," she said to her father.

So the King Āswapati went on no farther, but turned his white steeds homeward.

And when he arrived at Madra he sent forthwith for Narada, wisest and holiest of all the sages, and,

bidding Sâvitrî relate their journey and all that had happened, asked his counsel.

Narada listened with kindly beaming eyes as the young Princess, bowing low before him, told her tale, but when she came to the Prince Satyavân, and confessed how her heart was given to him and her choice made once and for ever, Narada's wise old face grew suddenly grave. Slowly he shook his head, like a bell tolling out the death-knell of hope, as he declared this choice must be abandoned.

"But why so?" asked the King. "Is Satyavân not a good and noble Prince?"

"No living Prince can excel him in virtue and nobility. He is generous and just, constant and true, courageous yet tender and modest," answered Narada. "Nevertheless is the choice of the Princess evil, and not good."

"But, if the Prince be all thou sayest, why is my child's choice evil, and not good?" asked the King in surprise, while the eyes of Sâvitrî demanded the same question.

"Because," answered Narada, "this Prince is doomed in one year from to-day to die."

"Alas," cried the King; "if this be so indeed, my child, you must choose some other husband."

But Sâvitrî replied, "Whether he live one year or a hundred years my heart is given to Saty-

avân; no other will I wed." And kneeling at the King's feet she besought him to remember how he had himself required her to choose, and sworn by his royal sceptre to abide by her choice. "A maiden cannot take back her heart once given, nor the King his word," said Sâvitri.

Then Narada, seeing how the Princess had indeed so given her true heart that she could not withdraw it, counselled the King to consent, since this doubtless was the will of the gods.

And Āswapati, recognising a spirit as strong and steadfast as his own in the fair, gentle form of his daughter, acted on the advice of Narada and agreed to the marriage.

Again the King and his daughter mounted the golden car, and, followed by a royal escort of priests, sages, and nobles, set forth to the forest where the blind King held his woodland court.

They found him seated beneath a tree, deep in meditation, little dreaming of the noble guests who sought him. After offering them meat and drink and bidding them welcome, though it were only to the shade of the forest trees, he enquired what brought the noble Āswapati to seek him in his banishment.

Āswapati replied, telling all his story. As he spoke he looked full at the young Prince. But Satyavân's eyes were turned towards Sâvitri, he

saw none save her. And, when the King observed how she returned his look frankly and tenderly, he felt satisfied that those two were destined by the gods for one another.

But when Āswapati asked the consent of the blind King that Satyavân should marry Sâvitri, Dyumutsena sorrowfully shook his head.

To permit the fair and noble Princess to wed the son of a poor hermit and share their humble lot, would, he replied, not be following the path of justice and right. Had things been otherwise, gladly would he have welcomed such a daughter, gladly given such a wife to his beloved son, for in the days of their childhood this marriage was the very one towards which his heart had turned.

Then Āswapati assured the blind King that he and his daughter counted as less than nothing riches and power and prosperity; they, like Dyumutsena himself, had learned to know the real from the seeming, and he begged him to grant this desire of his and of Sâvitri's heart.

And Dyumutsena, whose soul had grown beyond the reach of petty worldly aims, was touched by the true wisdom of Āswapati's words. The hand of Satyavân, his son, rested on his shoulder; he spoke no word, but the blind King knew as surely as if he had poured forth all his soul that to wed the fair Sâvitri had become the desire also of his heart.

"Since so thou wilt, even so let it be, for doubtless this is the will of the gods," he replied, and raised his hands in blessing.

Great was the rejoicing in that forest home when the betrothal was proclaimed. From far and near the holy men and priests assembled, and all the marriage rites were performed in solemn state with the green trees for temple and altar.

The King Āswapati bestowed many and great gifts of jewels and precious stones on his daughter, then, blessing her, departed to his own kingdom.

But no sooner had he gone than Sâvitri took off her jewels and gold-embroidered robes, and putting on the yellow cloth of a hermit gave herself up to good works and humble deeds of service. So gentle and loving was she in this life that she won all hearts. The King and Queen rejoiced in their new daughter, and Satyavân thanked the gods daily for this crowning gift of blessings.

So the time passed, and as each new moon waned the heart of Sâvitri grew heavier. To no one did she whisper a word of her dread secret, only with anxious eyes she watched Satyavân when he was not observing her.

There seemed, however, to be little cause for her anxiety; Satyavân was like the forest trees in his well-grown strength and beauty of perfect health.

At last came round the fatal month foretold by

Narada. Each hour the load grew heavier on Sâvitri's heart, and on the fourth day before that one on which Satyavân must die she began the threefold fast. All fasts are hard, but this one is of all the most hard to accomplish, and faithfully to carry it out costs many saints their lives.

When the blind King and his Queen were told that their son's young wife had set herself to keep this fast they went to her, begging she would forego so hard a trial to her strength.

"Thy good works are many already; thy life is fair, holy, and pleasing to the gods; not for such as thee is this severe penance. We fear to lose thee, O daughter," they said.

But Sâvitri answered, "My vow is already made, and may not be broken. Have no fear for me; surely the gods will grant me strength to accomplish it."

So for three long days and nights Sâvitri sat as though carved in stone, neither moving nor speaking, neither eating, drinking, nor sleeping.

On the fourth morning with the first light of dawn she rose and made sacrifice to the gods, bringing flowers and fruit to the shrine of her own goddess Sâvitri, and softly chanting the morning prayers.

Then the holy Brahmans rejoiced with her that her hard vow was fulfilled, and her husband came

to her, and all besought her to take food and rest.

But Sâvitri answered that not until the nightfall would she break her fast, so she had made her vow.

For Sâvitri said in her heart, "How should I touch food and drink till I know whether the gods have heard my prayer and Satyavân my Beloved shall live or die."

Then Satyavân shouldered his axe and said, "I must journey to-day over the hills to the farther groves, there to gather fruits for the great sacrifice which approaches. Farewell, and rest for to-day, my sweet wife."

But Sâvitri entreated him, "Let me go with thee; to-day of all days in the year I would be with thee."

"Nay, for thou art faint with the long fast," said Satyavân; "never could thy frail strength endure."

"My spirit is strong, and I know no fatigue or weakness when I am with thee," she pleaded.

So Satyavân and Sâvitri went through the forest and over the hills till they came to the groves, which were in full bloom. Together they filled the large rush baskets with ripe fruit, and then, while Sâvitri rested, Satyavân took his axe and hewed long branches from the trees. And while he worked Sâvitri watched him and watched also for Death. How would he come, this dread god Yama? All was smiling and secure in the

forest and grove. The great hills stood round as though protecting them, the great sun overhead poured down his warm blessing.

Suddenly Satyavân's arm fell to his side. He reeled and would have fallen had not Sâvitri sprung up quickly and encircled him with her arms.

"Alas," he groaned, "help me, sweet wife; I am stricken as if by an unseen blow. My blood turns to fire, my head to molten lead."

Sâvitri stretched him on the ground and laid his head upon her lap. Then all at once she was aware of a great form standing over her. She looked up and her heart stood still with fear. The stranger was clothed in dark-red robes, from beneath his turban flashed out deep, piercing eyes, in his hand he held a noose.

"Who art thou?" cried Sâvitri, starting to her feet and placing herself between Satyavân and this towering form.

"I am Yama, god of Death," answered the stranger. "He is a great and noble Prince, no meaner messenger did I find worthy of this charge; therefore am I come myself to draw the soul of Satyavân out of his body."

So saying he flung his noose about Satyavân and drew forth his soul. And immediately the body of Satyavân lay still and motionless, his heart ceased to beat.

"Return home now, O faithful wife, and pay the funeral rites," said Yama as he strode away, bearing beneath his flowing mantle the soul of Satyavân.

But Sâvitri followed swiftly after him, saying, "Where the soul of Satyavân goes there must his true wife follow. Great Yama, if thou forbid me not, who shall stay my steps? In the sacred books it is written that to go seven steps together makes good men friends; permit that I go with thee."

"Thy good deeds and thy devoted love shall not be unrewarded. Turn back now," said Yama, "and I will grant thee a boon, any boon thou wilt, except only the life of thy husband."

Sâvitri thought of what Satyavân had most desired upon earth, and answered even as he would have done:

"Grant me, O great Yama, that my husband's father may be healed of his blindness and his kingdom be restored to him in honour and peace."

"This boon will I grant thee. But now return to those sad parents. No farther canst thou follow; the way grows dark and dangerous," warned Yama.

"Yet suffer me to follow there where my heart goes and must needs go," entreated Sâvitri. "The way thou takest I do not fear, since thou bearest with thee Satyavân's soul. Grant me leave to sing to thee some holy verses he was wont to love."

And gently as she followed the great god of Death Sâvitri sang a sweet old temple hymn of the love immortal and undying which noble souls bear one towards another.

And Yama, who was wont to see all men shrink from him in terror and dismay, and whose ears heard nothing save groans and cries from the sons and daughters of men, listened with wonder and delight to the sweet voice at his side. His swift steps slackened as he turned towards Sâvitri, great pity in his eyes.

"Ask yet another boon," he said, "whatsoever thou wilt save only the life of Satyavân, and I will grant it to thee for the sake of the wisdom and beauty of thy song."

Then Sâvitri thought on her own father and how since she had left his home he greatly longed for sons to carry on his royal line and comfort him in his old age. So she answered:

"Grant me, O great Yama, that the King my father may have sons born to him, for save me he hath no other child."

"So shall it be; many sons shall be born to him and carry on his royal line," answered Yama. "Now, Princess, turn thy steps homewards, for great danger lies before thee."

"No danger can dismay me," answered Sâvitri. "My heart is surely set to follow to the end. Let

me sing yet once again to thee," she pleaded. And before Yama could say her nay she took up her song again, and this time sang the ancient noble hymn to Yama himself, calling him by his other and more beautiful name, Vaivaswata, King of Righteousness, he whom great and noble souls fear not but know to be their friend, highest among those mighty messengers who fulfil the behests of the Great Father.

"As water to the thirsty thy noble words refresh my spirit," said Yama. "For in truth the great god of Death is often weary and oppressed with sorrow by the blindness and injustice he meets with at the hands of man. Few there are who call him Vaivaswata."

"Except this soul I bear, ask one gift more, any thou wilt, and it is thine," he said to Sâvitri.

"I ask thee then a gift supreme indeed," replied Sâvitri. "The gift of sons, to be born to me and Satyavân, lovely, valiant, strong to carry on his line."

"Even this shall be," answered Yama. "Therefore go back, that strength and life be given thee to rear those sons."

But Sâvitri paid no heed to the oft-repeated warning of Yama. Lightly and swiftly she walked by his side, as though she could know neither pain nor weariness nor hunger, in spite of her long fast.

Again she sang as she went, and this time there was in her song a holy joy and peace that inclined his heart towards her as towards a best-beloved child. Not even for the sake of this last promised happiness would Sâvitrî forsake her Beloved. Cheerfully, joyfully she followed him rather to that unknown land whither Death was bearing him. And Yama, seeing that neither danger, death, nor even earthly joy could separate Sâvitrî from her Satyavân, turned to her and said:

“Be it unto thee even as thou wilt, O faithful heart. Take thou the soul of thy Beloved. He shall return to earth with thee, and together thou shalt reign in peace and love, shedding blessing around thee and training noble sons and daughters to carry on thy work after thy time on earth is fulfilled and I come again to call hence both thee and him.”

Sâvitrî bowed low before the mighty god, speechless with joy as she received from him the soul of Satyavân. For a moment Yama stood and blessed her, the next he was gone, and Sâvitrî rose up and sped back to the spot where lay the lifeless body of Satyavân.

With a deep-drawn sigh, as one who wakes from long, dreamless sleep, Satyavân opened his eyes and woke to find his head still resting on Sâvitrî's lap, while gently her hand smoothed his brow.

The shadows of night were falling fast, a cool breeze rustled the leaves of the trees. Satyavân gazed about him perplexed.

"Have I slumbered so long?" he asked.

But Sâvitri only answered:

"Yea, thy sleep was long but needful for thy cure, Beloved. Let us now turn homeward lest thy parents fear for our safety."

So together they journeyed slowly homeward through the dark ways of the forest, Satyavân leaning for support on the shoulder of Sâvitri and wondering why, though free from pain, he felt weak as a tired child.

The morning had almost dawned when on nearing their journey's end they met the King Dyumutsena setting out to search for them; no longer the blind and feeble old man they left the day before, but his sight and strength restored as in the fullness of his manhood.

Then Sâvitri, while the King, Queen, Satyavân, and all the holy Brahmans sat around her, told her tale, and how she and Death had journeyed together.

One by one all the good gifts promised by Yama were fulfilled, and still in India, though she lived so long ago, men remember and bless the name of Sâvitri.

The Peasant Maid



The Peasant Maid

CHAPTER I

MANY years ago, about the time that Jeanne the peasant maid was listening to the heavenly voices as she tended her father's flock in Brittany, another peasant maid, also with the gift of hearing the angels, dwelt in Germany near the great forest of Odenwald.

Elsa's parents, Gottlieb and Ursula, were simple, pious folk, living apart from the busy, hurrying world, earning their living by working a small farm and vineyard. Elsa, the eldest of three children, was the joy of their hearts; a tall, fair maiden, with shining, golden hair which framed her face like a Madonna's halo, and eyes pure and clear as wells of water. Every one loved her as one needs must love the sunshine, flowers, and all good things which shed their fragrance round us, sweetening life. It was Elsa who helped her father with the farm and vineyard; Elsa, who tended the flowers, looked after the children, and sang with them their evening prayer; Elsa, too,

who helped her mother to spin and weave all the clothes and linen of the thrifty little household.

But, though she was such a busy, useful maiden, Elsa loved nothing so well as to wander and dream alone in the forest. She had strange ideas, so people said, and cared little for the things that pleased other maidens. Her thoughts were ever with the blessed Madonna, whose shrine she kept always fresh with flowers, and with the saints and martyrs who had suffered and died for their faith. She knew all their stories, and the two little ones, Bertha and Max, would sit still as mice while she told them of Saint Cecilia and the young Saint Agnes, of the brave boy martyr Pancrasius, and of Dorothea, who after her death sent flowers from the garden of Paradise to convince her heathen lover. And as she wandered alone in the forest, or knelt at the Virgin's shrine in the quiet evening time, Elsa often heard voices, low yet clear, speaking to the heart more than the ear; soft, sweet voices, which she knew could belong only to the angels of Paradise, for you must be very still to hear them, your thoughts emptied of self, your soul white and clean.

One day a sad story came to the little farm of how the lord of that country, Prince Henry of Hoheneck, was stricken with a mysterious complaint which no doctor could cure. Once the

first in the land, leader in chase, in tilt, or tourney, he had now become silent and melancholy, his health wasted by a consuming fever, which gave him no rest by night or day. Alone he dwelt in the tower of his castle, seeing no one, and poring continually over old books in search of some remedy.

The Prince had been a generous lord to his people, and all were grieved to hear of his sickness, but especially Gottlieb and his family. To the bounty of Prince Henry they owed all they possessed, the farm and vineyard being a gift to Gottlieb in reward for years of faithful service. Many a time when a little lad had Gottlieb taken the young Prince Henry shooting and hunting in the forest, taught him to string a bow, train a falcon and many other useful arts. As he grew up none felt more pride in the Prince's fame and success than Gottlieb.

And now the castle, once so gay with feasting and merry-making, stood silent and deserted. Grass sprang up in the courtyard, which formerly rang with the clatter of horses' hoofs. The Prince sat alone in his tower or stood on the terrace looking down for hours into the torrent below.

Doctors from all parts tried their remedies in vain, none could even find out the nature of his disease. One learned physician, however, from the

school of medicine in far-away Salerno, wrote that there was a remedy for the Prince's mysterious illness, though one from its nature counted impossible ; namely, that a maiden should of her own free will give her heart's blood, and die that he might live. This extraordinary cure the Prince put aside as out of the question, and from that time looked on himself as a doomed man.

Shortly after this the countryside was astir with the news that a dreadful thing had happened at the castle. Hubert, the faithful old seneschal, had found his master one early morning lying in a deadly swoon upon the floor. By his side was a curiously wrought crystal flask, empty save for a few drops. His face was terribly changed and drawn. The priest was called, and at the sight of the flask he shuddered, at the smell of its contents he crossed himself. Then came the Bishop with more priests. It was but too evident, they declared, that this potent draught had come from the hand of Lucifer, the Prince was in league with the Evil One ! His mysterious complaint, strange ways, and lonely habits were now fully explained.

The faithful Hubert meanwhile had used means to restore his master, and would have borne him away to nurse and tend him, but no sooner did he open his eyes than the Bishop stepped in, saying such a deadly sinner must be dealt with by the

Church. From henceforth the sick man must be banished, and until the evil spirit in him took his departure he must be shunned by all godly folk who valued their own souls. The Prince, report said, seemed to care little what the priests said or what became of him. He stood in the old church where his forefathers were buried, as still and immovable as one of the monuments, while the priests muttered over him a mass for the dead and laid on his head three shovels full of churchyard mould, in token that from henceforth to the world he was as one dead. Then from the chapel door they drove him forth into banishment, clothed in a long grey cloak, carrying a wallet, and a bell to warn all men to shun him.

On hearing of their Prince's trouble Gottlieb and Ursula at once set out to seek him. They found him in the forest, wandering about as one in a dream. At first the Prince refused their entreaty that he would make their humble dwelling his home. He was a doomed and dying man, he said, and why should he bring the Church's curse on good, honest people? for it was forbidden that any should show him hospitality.

But Gottlieb and Ursula answered that the Master they served had left them a higher law than that of the Church, and were he the meanest outcast on God's earth, instead of their own beloved Prince,

they would only be obeying that Master's command in receiving him into their home. Besides, was not all they possessed the gift of their Prince? Could he then refuse them the joy of offering him some small return?

Prince Henry, touched by the faithful love of his humble friends, at last consented. The old seneschal Hubert, who unknown to his master had followed him at a distance, rejoiced to leave him in such good hands, and returned to the deserted castle to guard his master's property and pray for his recovery and return.

From this time began a happier life for the poor Prince. The atmosphere of love and peace in the little farmhouse was like balm to his troubled spirit. Lucifer paid him no visits there, and the Prince drank no draught more potent than that which Elsa drew from the deep, cool well. But still the mysterious complaint which was wasting his life kept its hold. Hour after hour he might be heard pacing up and down in his room overhead. Only with Elsa and the children did he seem to forget his sickness. His gentle, kindly ways won their hearts from the first, and often he would walk with them in the forest, cutting arrows for little Max and telling them tales of his travels and adventures. But, when his fits of moodiness and sadness came on, Elsa alone was able to cheer him, and, as he

listened to the old legends of her favourite saints and looked at her sweet, earnest face, he felt that the saints were not all dead and gone.

Every morning and evening Elsa prayed for the Prince to the blessed Madonna of the Sacred Heart, and to her own patroness, Saint Cecilia, keeping the flowers brightest at her shrine lest she should forget Prince Henry. Elsa herself never forgot him; day and night her every thought turned towards one great desire to help and heal him.

One day her father told her how there was no hope on earth for the Prince, and he must die, unless indeed God worked a miracle or some maiden of her own accord offered her life in his stead.

"Some maiden?" cried Elsa. "I will do it."

"Prithee be still, foolish child — talk not so wildly."

"I mean it truly — my words are from the heart," replied Elsa. But her father hastened to speak of other things, thinking it but the wild and sudden idea of a young girl, to which if one paid no heed it would quickly pass.

One night not long after, when all had gone to rest, Gottlieb and Ursula heard some one sobbing in the dark. It was Elsa.

"What ails thee, my child?" asked her mother anxiously.

"I cannot sleep or rest thinking of our poor Prince, how he must die," she cried.

"His life and healing are in God's hands alone," said Gottlieb; "thou canst do nothing."

"Nay, but what if God has put his life and healing into my hands? My heart tells me this is so," answered Elsa.

Then Gottlieb knew that the words she had spoken before had not been lightly uttered, and a great fear stole over him for this his beloved child—that she should die even to save the Prince was a thought he could not bear. As to Ursula, she did not as yet realise the purpose of Elsa; her words sounded wild, and she doubted if she were not dreaming.

Then Elsa, kneeling by their side and clasping her mother's hand in hers, told how the desire of her heart was to give her life that she might save that of their dear Prince. What was death that she should fear it? The body ceased to breathe, that was all! Elsa reminded them that she had seen a little sister die. How peaceful and beautiful she had looked, her lips sealed with a wonderful smile, as if God whispered to her a joyful secret. Through the open window a gentle breeze had floated like the sound of angels' wings come to bear her to Paradise. "The saints have died," pleaded Elsa, "and Mary and our dear

Lord. I long to follow where their steps have led the way! "

But Gottlieb and Ursula wept sorely at her words, and besought her that she would not leave them.

"Thou art the joy of our old hearts; thou must not die," said her father.

"When thou art away from my sight I know no rest or peace till thou return," sobbed her mother.

Elsa wept with them, but entreated still. "Oh, my beloved parents, it is the voice of God himself that calls me to give my life and save our Prince! Do not say me nay. This night I had a vision of Paradise; the gates were open, and Christ stood there and beckoned me to come. Even the priest himself could not forbid me when I told him my desire in the confessional."

"What if this were indeed the will of God?" whispered Gottlieb, awe-struck.

"Ah, then," said Ursula, "we dare not gainsay it! Go to thy bed and rest, my child. We in our blindness cannot judge; we will pray that God may guide us. Go, sleep, and weep no more."

From this time Elsa had no opposition from her parents. With tears and prayers they bade her do what her heart dictated. But the consent she could not gain was that of Prince Henry. His better self said no; never must he buy life at such a

price. Little by little, however, he found he could not put the thought away. So great was his longing for life and health, so great his horror of death, against his will his mind dwelt on any means of escape. Elsa herself never ceased to beseech him, saying God had sent her to save him, and her little life, so humble, so little worth, would thus be made beautiful and of service to many; the Prince must live to do a great work for his people.

At last Prince Henry made up his mind to consult the village priest, a good, holy man, whose advice Gottlieb and his wife had already sought.

It was late one evening when the old priest, after listening all day to tales of sin and sorrow, waited in the church for Prince Henry of Hoheneck.

To the parents of Elsa, when they asked his counsel, the priest had said, "Leave your child to follow the divine voice within her, and the divine voices she hears when to us all is silent. If God calls her we may not say him nay." But for the Prince the good priest had other words ready: "Deny the tempter. Be strong. Live and die a martyr's death sooner than accept health and life at such a cost! Thus will I speak to that unhappy man," said the priest to himself. Pacing up and down the dim aisle he grew impatient, for there

were sick and dying among his flock whom he must visit that night, and darkness was closing in. At last, unable to wait longer, the priest left the church and hurried off to the village.

Hardly had he gone when the church door swung open cautiously, and another priest, tall, dark, and evil-looking, glided in. Seeing the church empty, he drew himself up, and with a mocking laugh bowed low before the altar. "Oh, what a dark, dismal hole!" he cried. "And they call this the house of the Lord! I am glad they don't build me such houses. Ah, here is the confessional, and here comes my Prince, whom soon I hope to turn into a murderer! In the twilight he will see no difference between the priest and me."

So saying he stepped quickly into the confessional, and soon after Prince Henry walked up and knelt on the well-worn step at the portal. "Holy father," he cried, "I come to make my confession and crave thy blessing."

"Make first thy confession, my son," said a voice from within. "Not till after that comes my benediction. Does the same madness and unrest still possess thee?"

"Alas, it does, O holy father! Every thought now rushes like a mighty stream towards Salerno; whether sleeping or waking this idea haunts me

ever. I can find no peace or rest, uncertain what is best to do. Greatly I fear to do the wrong."

"Be not alarmed on that account," answered the mock priest. "An act is often made right by reason of its results, and the Church is ever kind and merciful to her children. Thou art a prince, the last of thy race. If thou shouldst die, think of all the good and noble deeds thou must leave undone, and of the great name which would die with thee. She is but a peasant maid, born to a life of toil and sorrow; that she should desire the joys and splendours of Paradise in exchange for a world of wretchedness and woe is no marvel. The Church blesses her sacrifice; accept therefore the gift of her young life and live."

"And will the righteous Heaven forgive if there be aught in my act that is not pleasing, — have I thine absolution in accepting such a sacrifice?" asked the Prince anxiously. Deep down in his soul he was ill at ease. But the words of the priest opened a door to health and life. Prince Henry longed for these as a man dying of thirst longs for water. So he hushed the voice in his soul and listened to that of the mock priest.

"Aye, free absolution I give thee, my son! From this deed and from all crimes into which it may lead thee I do now wholly absolve thee." So saying a hand was stretched forth and laid on the

head of the Prince, and a voice muttered what Prince Henry took to be a blessing. Had he heard aright he would not have bowed his head so reverently to the holy father. Rising from his knees it seemed to him that the arches of the dim old church echoed with low, mysterious voices, sighing sadly as if in warning. He thought of Elsa and the voices she heard; could they be the same, he wondered, and what did they say? Well, the priest had spoken in no uncertain tone, and surely no man could give better counsel than a holy priest!

The evening meal was over in the little farmhouse. The children were in bed when Prince Henry returned. With bowed head he listened while Gottlieb told him how after days and nights of prayer the terrible struggle was over. God had shown him and his wife that this sacrifice was his will. "Even as Abraham we obey that voice," said the poor man with shaking voice. "We give our child, O Prince, that you may live!"

"Yes, it is of God," said Ursula, weeping; "the mother's heart may resist no longer."

Prince Henry did not speak. His head bent lower. Then Elsa came towards him, her face lit with a great joy as she said:

"O my Prince, take the gift I so gladly give. It is but a humble little life, of no more value than

a cup of cold water, but with God's blessing it shall restore and heal you."

The Prince raised his head. Looking into her face it seemed to him like that of an angel — an angel of God sent to bring him deliverance. In what manner he did not at that moment ask himself, but that she brought him a gift from heaven he felt sure in his heart. Taking her two hands in his, humbly and fervently he answered:

"I accept the gift. God bless the giver!"

Unable to say more he turned away and went out into the forest.

Presently Prince Henry was conscious of a white-robed figure at his side — the presence of one of Elsa's own saints or angels would not have surprised him to-night.

"I have a thing to ask of you," said a low, soft voice.

"It is granted," he replied. "What is it?"

"Promise me that never by word or deed you will try to turn me from my purpose," she begged. "When we set out on our journey to Salerno I would put away all thoughts save those of the holy city I hope so soon to enter with my petition. Oh, grant me this promise."

Prince Henry could not refuse what the sweet, earnest voice pleaded, though in his heart he now felt that never could he buy life at the price of

her death. So he answered, hoping to satisfy her, "If ever we depart upon this journey — I promise thee."

Elsa started in sudden fear. "Shall we not go, then? Have I been lifted to the gates of heaven only to be thrown down wounded to the earth again?"

"O Elsa, what a lesson thou dost teach me," sighed the sick Prince. "To me the thought of death is terrible, having such hold on this life; to thee it is but a step into the open air out of a tent already lit by the light from outside." Then he added, seeing nothing less would content her, "Be comforted, sweet child. We will go together on this journey — thy wish is granted."

CHAPTER II

IT was night in the ancient city of Strasburg. Silence reigned in the dark streets. All slept save one, a solitary man who wandered to and fro with restless step. Sometimes he paused to gaze from the bridge into the dark, flowing river. Sometimes he groaned aloud as if in deep distress of mind.

Presently in the distance a hoarse voice broke upon the stillness. Near it came and nearer till Prince Henry could distinguish the words, "Wake! Wake! All ye that sleep — pray for the dead — pray for the dead." He remembered this was the hour when good Catholics woke from their sleep to offer prayers for those departed souls who had not yet attained the peace and rest of Paradise. He listened impatiently as the crier shouted his loud summons down the silent streets. "Pray for the living, rather," he murmured; "for those in whose hearts is waging the fierce war betwixt good and ill."

Passing down the street in which was the hostelry, he paused and looked up, saying softly,

"Wake not, my beloved. May thy slumbers be peaceful and silent as the night. At thy gate watcheth one whose heart is heavy and desolate."

Thoughts of his past wasted life pursued Prince Henry like a troop of demons. "Too late now," they whispered; "too late!" Health and strength were gone. Death would soon claim him — claim him before he had lived out half his days. He was journeying to Salerno, there to die, for, though he would not tell her so, he knew now that some better self within refused to live at the price of this maiden's death.

He wandered on through the sleeping city. The great cathedral rose up before him, a mighty pile towering into the sky. The pale moon peeped out between the clouds and cast deep shadows across the square; a man on horseback came out of the shadow and looked to right and left as if in search of his way. Seeing Prince Henry he called to him, asking where was the inn.

At the sound of his voice the Prince hastened forward.

"Art thou not Walter of the Vogelweid?" he asked eagerly.

The horseman sprang to the ground and clasped his hand. "Aye, surely," he cried joyfully; "and thou art Henry of Hoheneck — well met, indeed. What draws thee from thy German farm to the old

Alsatian city?" he asked. Walter of the Vogelweid, famous poet and sweetest singer, the friend of Prince Henry's youth, had heard the sad story of the mysterious illness of the poor Prince.

"Mine is a pitiful tale," sighed the Prince. "A wretched, dying man, I am dragging my body on a last journey to Salerno, never to return. And thou—where art thou bound, thus armed as a knight?"

"I am for Palestine. See the cross of the Crusaders on my breast," answered the minstrel. "My heart beats high with hope. I give my life to the Holy War."

His voice rang clear and strong. His face shone like that of Saint George about to slay the dragon.

"Would that my road were the same!" sighed the sick man. "Oh, to be like thee, poet and soldier, glorious in the beauty and strength of life. Both thy lyre and thy sword thou givest unto the Lord, while I, a miserable wreck of manhood, live for myself alone."

Walter of the Vogelweid looked at the unhappy face of his friend. The clear moonlight showed him in truth as the very ghost of the Henry of Hoheneck of former days. A great pity filled his heart and his eyes grew misty as he spoke.

"Take courage, my friend. Health and strength will return to thee. Come with me to the hostelry,"

he urged; "I have many things to say to thee. Let us make our journey together into Italy."

But Prince Henry made excuse that he and his retinue would but hinder the eager steps of the knight. The sight of the noble soldier-poet, once his dearest friend and comrade, made him ashamed. He knew well Walter of Vogelweid never gave so much as a thought to himself. If a wasting fever laid hold on *him* he would ride with it to the wars, and die in his saddle if he must die.

So the friends parted, and the next day at dawn Walter of Vogelweid was again on his way to Palestine to fight in the Holy War.

But from that time a change came over Henry of Hoheneck, gradual at first like the slow dawning of a winter's morn, but sure and steady as the coming of the sun. He ceased to speak of his sickness and to deplore his lack of strength. All his thought and care seemed now to be for the maiden who rode at his side. To show her everything of beauty and interest he roused himself when at another time he would have been overcome with fatigue and suffering. Her wonder and delight repaid him a thousand-fold, and he found himself seeing with new eyes new beauties in scenes of which he had thought himself weary.

To Elsa the journey was like a wonderful dream. The great cathedral with its glorious pictures of

her beloved saints and martyrs stirred her with holy joy. The snowy-peaked Alps and the beautiful blue lakes of Switzerland made her wonder if Paradise itself could be fairer. Every step revealed some new beauty or new wonder. Never had she imagined this world could be so full of good gifts. And it was her beloved Prince who himself was her guide and teacher, so wise and yet so tender and patient with the simple country maiden that she quite forgot her ignorance and humble birth. That the Prince who had seen so much of life and was so great and wise could be learning from her she little dreamed, yet day by day he was gaining the wisdom which is more to be desired than much fine gold.

So they journeyed together through the long summer days, the Prince and the young peasant girl, who, from her sweet, gracious ways and quiet dignity, every one took to be some fair lady of high degree.

One night they rested at a convent. After vespers in the chapel Prince Henry found himself alone with a monk who remained kneeling before the altar. When at length he rose Prince Henry saw that he was blind, and looking closer recognised in this blind monk the deadliest foe of his race, Count Hugo of the Rhine, so changed, however, from the strong, proud man of former days he

would not have known him but for a deep scar on his forehead, won in a well-remembered fight. His fierce look was gone, and though the face was still strong it was with the strength of one who has conquered himself more than that of the fighter. Prince Henry made himself known. The monk started—he made sure his former enemy had sought him out for vengeance, and he begged him if this were so to take now all the revenge he would, then pardon and forget the past, even as he had done since the great change which had come over him.

At sight of the fierce Count Hugo, blind and so altered from his former self, Henry of Hoheneck felt all enmity die. He no longer wished for revenge, but his heart was full of pity for his foe's misfortune and wonder at his patience. Grasping his old enemy's hand he begged no thought of strife might be between them.

"We have both erred," he said, "but the hand of God has touched each of us with the fire of pain. I also am changed. Let us kneel together here and pray for pardon that our souls may be purified."

So they knelt together, the two deadly foes, before the blessed Madonna of Sorrows, and when they parted it was as brothers.

Standing in the shadow of the archway a tall, dark figure had watched them unseen. His face

wore an ugly scowl as he saw the friendly parting. "Those were once two of my most promising sons," he muttered. "I fear one has slipped me altogether, and the other is on the same road, owing to that pale-faced saint. Still, while there's life there's hope! Meanwhile to cheer myself with the jovial monks in the refectory."

He glided silently out of the chapel before Prince Henry could see him. Soon after a wild scene, most ill-suited to that quiet convent, was taking place in the refectory. The stranger monk was entertaining the rest with tales of his convent in Brittany, where hunting, frolicking, and feasting were, he said, the order of the day. "I fear," he laughed, "that here you are a little too pious. Be advised by me, brothers—give up midnight masses and all that folly; be jolly, drink deep, and die game!"

Some of the monks crossed themselves and began to eye the stranger askance, but many seemed bewitched by him and set to work at once to follow his advice. They filled up the big tankard and sang songs as they passed it round more suited to the tavern than the monastery. In the midst of the riotous scene suddenly the door opened and the Abbot appeared. His eye flashed lightning, his voice rolled thunder, as he dismissed the monks with heavy penances to their cells. But when he

turned to deal justice to the stranger monk, lo! he had vanished! He had not gone by the door, for the Abbot himself stood there; nor yet by the window, for that was closed. Yet no trace of him remained. The holy Abbot turned pale and his hand shook as he made the sign of the cross and hurriedly murmured a *Pater noster*.

Prince Henry in the guest's cell knew nothing of the other visitor who had followed his steps to the convent. Nor did Elsa guess what ill looks were cast after her as she and her attendants entered the neighbouring nunnery. The Abbess, a stately, beautiful lady, received her gladly. From the moment her eyes met those of the German maiden she felt drawn towards her as to one she had known and loved before, and as they sat together that evening in the quiet convent garden the Lady Abbess told Elsa the story of her youth and love. It was a tale of grief and despair and broken hearts and hopes. Elsa looked at the calm, beautiful face and marvelled how so great a peace could have followed on such storms. For the Abbess had suffered for love's sake more by far in living than Elsa ever could in dying.

Next morning they were on their journey again, riding through the pine forests and over the mountain passes. The attendants rejoiced to see how day by day their master gained new health

and strength. The mysterious fever had lost its power over him and at times he seemed almost happy. Only the Prince himself and Elsa seemed unaware of this change for the better, her mind being fixed on offering up her life for him at Salerno, while he was determined to journey so far, there to leave his bones and die.

And following them over mountain and valley, though keeping generally well out of sight, stalked a tall, cloaked figure. When he overheard any gloomy or despairing words from Prince Henry, if he spoke with fear of death or with disgust of life, this follower would rub his hands and laugh low to himself; but when Elsa's sweet voice spoke hope and comfort to the sick man he would fall back, scowling and trembling as if in deadly fear.

Once, as they stood on the old covered bridge at Lucerne, looking at the pictures of the Dance of Death, the Prince was suddenly overcome with gloomy dread, but Elsa turned to him with her sweet smile:

"The grave is but a covered bridge like this, leading from light to light through a brief darkness."

Lucifer, listening, muttered a curse. If Prince Henry believed her words there would be no more chance for his schemes. He had hoped that the

sight of the world, its beauties and riches, would have made "the pale saint," as he called her, loath to quit so fair a place. Then might he perhaps have gained her soul too for his kingdom. But Lucifer was in bad luck over this undertaking, everything seemed to be going against him! For, though there were dark times when the Prince felt tempted to give up the constant struggle between good and evil, the words of Elsa sank deep into his heart.

At length they reached Italy. Elsa's heart was full of joy at being in the lovely land of the Madonna. Here dwelt Her own children — the wayside shrine, the little niche for her statue over the cottage-door, all testified to the love this people bore the Virgin Mary.

At Genoa the travellers halted for the night. Prince Henry stood on the terrace overlooking the sea. Wearied with the journey his mind was filled with gloomy thoughts. The night was very still, and he leaned over and gazed at the great, mysterious sea. Away, away far into the distance it stretched till the farthest limit touched the sky. All at once a man in a fishing boat below began to sing. The night was so still Prince Henry could hear the words plainly; they seemed to echo some thought that the vast, heaving sea had been speaking to him:

“Thou didst not make it,
Thou canst not mend it;
But thou hast the power to end it.
The sea is silent, the sea is discreet;
Deep it lies at thy very feet.”

Sweetly the fisherman sang in his native tongue.

“The power to end it,” repeated Prince Henry.
“Yes, deep lies the sea at my very feet. It seems
to call me to its bosom. A single step and there
would be an end of all my misery and pain, and
Elsa, the sweet maiden, would be free.”

Even as he spoke her name to himself Elsa
came out to him on the terrace. “How beautiful
is the music of the sea,” she said. “All the stars
come out to listen. Like a solemn litany the
voice of the waves murmurs low—Listen!
‘Christe eleïson!’ All along the shore they take
it up—the caverns echo it again. ‘Christe
eleïson!’”

This was what the great sea said to Elsa.

“Like an angel of God dost thou come to me,”
sighed the Prince. “Thine ear is tuned to hear
the heavenly voices; mine but those of earth or
demons of the air.”

He leaned over to look for the fisherman, but to
his surprise there was no sign of man or boat.
They had vanished.

CHAPTER III

SALERNO at last! To Elsa the gate of heaven; to Prince Henry the gate of the grave.

They lost no time in seeking out Friar Angelo, the learned doctor who had written to the prince about the remedy for his malady. At the gates of the famous College of Salerno he stood awaiting them, a tall figure dressed in the long black robe of a doctor. While still in the distance he had watched them coming; the Prince, the maiden, and the attendants. The learned doctor looked anxious and muttered to himself, "This odour of love and faith which fills the air as they draw near is an atmosphere I cannot breathe. It makes me ill, and fills me with fear that after all my trouble things may go wrong."

"Can you direct me to the learned doctor, Friar Angelo?" asked Prince Henry.

"He stands before you," was the answer.

Little did the Prince think how often he had seen the learned doctor before. He hastened to explain that he was Henry of Hoheneck, and Elsa

the maiden mentioned in his letters. The doctor bowed and fixed his keen, dark eyes on Elsa. "Does she consent of her own free will?" he asked.

"No entreaties will make her renounce her purpose," answered the Prince. For some time past he had in truth been doing his utmost to persuade Elsa to return to her home, and leave him to go on his journey alone. But she begged so hard he would hold to his promise and accept her sacrifice that he could do nothing save determine to prevent it at the last.

"Hast thou well considered this?" asked the friar of Elsa.

"Disturb me not with questions," she begged. "I come here to die, and would keep my mind free from thoughts of earth. Do now your part." She advanced to the door.

But Prince Henry, fearing what might happen next, cried hastily:

"Not a step farther. I forbid it. Only to put thy courage to the proof did I suffer thee to go so far."

Elsa looked at him with sorrow and reproach.

"O my Prince, remember your promises. I must fulfil my purpose. Strive not to turn me from it. If my deed is good it cannot be recalled." She turned to the attendants, who came

round her weeping, kissing her hands and the hem of her robe.

"Do not weep, my friends. I shall feel no pain, and you will but have gained another friend in heaven. Farewell, my Prince. Take back my blessing to those dear ones at home—tell them I prayed for them this morning after confession, when my soul was white and clean. And you, dear Prince, do not, I beseech you, let the memory of me trouble you with sadness. Think of me as one who loves you and is often near you." Then quickly turning to the friar, before Prince Henry could prevent her, she said, "Come, I am ready—let us go."

He took her hand and drew her quickly through the great doors, which instantly closed on them with a dull clang.

Prince Henry rushed forward and hammered loudly on the door, crying out, "Friar Angelo, I charge you on your life open the doors. Believe no word she says—she is mad and comes here to be healed, not to die!"

But the Prince commanded and hammered in vain. The only reply from the other side of the closed doors was a voice in the distance, "Too late—too late!" Surely he had heard those tones before and in the self-same words.

"Farewell, dear Prince, farewell," echoed faintly

another voice, now become to him the dearest sound on earth. Life without her was not worth having. Better death a thousand times than life with the light gone out of it. "It shall *not* be too late," he cried, all his old strength and power rushing back to him in that moment. Then, calling on his attendants to help, he flung himself on the door, battering and clubbing with such force that all the good folks in Salerno thought their city besieged. At last with a crash like the crack of doom the doors fell in, and Prince Henry and his followers rushed forward with drawn swords.

CHAPTER IV

URSULA sat at her cottage-door spinning. Her poor old fingers toiled on busily, just as they had toiled all her life long. But her thoughts were not with her wheel; they were far away, trying in vain to follow after the beloved child whom she missed every hour of the day. Where was she now? Still journeying through those foreign countries, which seemed to Ursula and Gottlieb as far away as the stars; or was it all over, and their sweet Elsa an angel in Paradise? No word of news had come since that sad day of parting when they had seen her ride away through the forest with the Prince at her side. Elsa had wept when she bade them farewell, but she had not looked sad. Oh no, her face had shone like the face of one who sees heaven open. "The martyr Stephen must have looked even so," thought her mother.

Since that day Gottlieb had never smiled. After the day's work he would sit apart, often sighing heavily, sometimes the great tears in his eyes. For his sake Ursula would try to be cheerful, but

trying to be cheerful is heart-breaking work at the best, and deceives no one whose own heart is aching.

A click at the garden-gate made Ursula look out. A stranger was walking up the path. As he came near she saw him to be a forester wearing the livery of the Prince. In quick alarm she rose and went out to meet him. He enquired for the farm of Gottlieb. She answered with a sinking heart, "It is here — what may your business be?"

"News from the Prince," replied the man.

"Of death or life?" Elsa's mother could scarcely utter the words.

"I left the Prince some hours ago as strong and well as ever he has been in his life," answered the forester.

Ursula groaned. "Alas, then, my child is dead!"

"I never said so — don't cross the bridge till you come to it, my good dame!" Then, seeing how the poor mother was well-nigh distracted with grief and anxiety, he broke to her the joyful news that, far from being dead, her daughter was, on the contrary, alive and well, returning homewards even now. "Sailing down the Rhine in a splendid barge with a golden prow, dressed all in silk and velvet, as becomes a real Princess, which she now is! For you must know that the Prince made a vow at Salerno that no one would he wed but the maiden Elsa, your daughter."

Ursula sank down by her spinning-wheel.

"Holy Virgin," she cried, "I thank thee! My child was dead and is alive again."

"You thought she was dead, but I never said so," corrected the forester. "As to the Prince," he went on, "they say he was cured by the touch of St. Matthew's sacred bones, but for my part I believe the long journey in the open air made a sound man of him before ever he touched the old bones. Anyway, here they come and will arrive on the morrow, and a sweeter bride than the Prince has won could no man find!"

But Ursula did not wait to hear the end of the forester's speech; she was already out in the vineyard, calling to Gottlieb to come quick and hear the wonderful news.

That evening was a happy one in the little farmhouse. Tears of joy mingled with the hymn of praise and thanksgiving, and the forester, who had stayed to share their humble fare, declared it was like being in church on Easter-day.

So Elsa saved her Prince after all, though not in the way of which she had ever dreamed. For love saves always; if not in one way then another, provided only it is deep enough, high enough, and strong enough.

The Little Duchess



The Little Duchess

CHAPTER I

IN a little white convent perched on a vine-clad hill overlooking the sunniest of green valleys dwelt the good nuns of Our Lady of Consolation. In their midst, like the blue gentian among the snowy peaks of its protecting Alps, grew up a blue-eyed maiden, the pet and darling of all the white-robed sisters.

Her father and mother were dead, brother or sister had she none, no one in all the world belonging to her, unless one may count a guardian whom she had never seen. Once a year he wrote her a letter with a big red seal, telling her to be good. She, for her part, never dreamed of being otherwise; why should she, in a good, green world where everyone was kind and happy? The Blessed Virgin took care of the nuns, and they took care of the valley, taught the children, nursed the sick, comforted the dying, and gave of the fruit of their gardens and vineyards to all.

The "little one," as they called her, helped them in everything, her special work being to water the

flowers and gather them for the altar of the convent chapel. Even when she reached the age of seventeen they continued to call her their little one, for she was small and dainty as a fairy, and loved nothing better than to sing and dance all day, lighting up the grey old cloisters like a ray of sunshine.

Sometimes she wondered what the great world was like that lay beyond the valley. It was full of "peril," the good nuns said, but even in that word there was attraction—did it not call up pictures of brave knights fighting for fair ladies? Battles, sieges, triumphal war-songs, and gorgeous festivals to do honour to the victor and the beauteous lady whose hand he had won? History and poetry certainly mentioned such things. Oh, it must be an entrancing, stirring world in spite of all the "perils."

Once a year a strange tribe of wandering gypsies passed through the peaceful valley. There were many tales about them among the peasants, but no one could ever say they did any harm. They brought curious gifts from foreign lands, old needlework and silver, which they begged the Lady Abbess to accept in return for her goodness in allowing them to camp at the foot of the convent hill and to fish in the river.

The "little one" was not allowed to go down and

talk with them, lest they should fill her head with nonsense and superstitious tales; the mere sight of them, however, filled her head with wild fancies and her heart with mad longings. She said nothing about it to the good nuns, but from a little upper window in the convent a pair of wide-awake blue eyes watched eagerly as the gypsies sat round their camp-fires at night, singing wild, wonderful songs and dancing to the click of their castanets. They came from the great world outside, these strange gypsies, and brought a breeze into the quiet valley that went to the head like strong wine!

One day the Mother Superior received a letter from the far-away guardian containing important news. She sent for "the little one," and her hand shook as she took out the big-sealed letter — and as she read to the smiling girl at her feet the smile vanished, and a look half fear, half wonder, took its place.

"I have just arranged a highly honourable marriage for my ward the young Countess," wrote the guardian. "The Duke, whose vast possessions lie in the north country, will send a fitting escort to fetch his bride in the first days of the month of May." Then followed directions to the Lady Abbess, with the request that she would make known to his ward the honour for which she was to prepare herself.

"It is a splendid future for thee, my child," replied the Abbess. "We knew we might not hope to keep our singing-bird in this little nest when once her wings were grown. Ah me! may Our Lady of Consolation be with thee always, beloved child!"

So she was to go into the unknown world and to be a great lady — a Duchess. Oh, how many things she would do and see! It was sad to leave the dear, kind nuns and the sweet valley, but it was true what the Mother had said; her wings were grown and she must use them — yes, and she longed to use them.

The first flowers of April were already peeping out between tender green leaves, and the weeks that followed seemed to fly. Then May Day dawned, and on the morrow the quiet little valley was roused by the stir and clatter of the arrival of a grand retinue of servants, horses, and carriages.

The Duke had sent to fetch his bride.

According to the guardian's instructions, the Abbess had provided all things befitting the rank of the future Duchess. The new possessions which gave her most joy were a beautiful palfrey on which she was to make the journey, and last, but not least, her own tire-woman, the pretty, dark-eyed Jacynth, who, besides being the merriest of

companions, was the most devoted of handmaids. To serve the little blue-eyed lady had always been Jacynth's delight, and, taught in the convent school, they had known each other from childhood. No fingers could make such fine stitches and do such rare needlework as Jacynth's. It was a proud and happy day for her when she found herself mounted on one of the Duke's palfreys, riding away into the world at her mistress' side.

When all farewells were over, and a turn in the road hid the last glimpse of the white convent from her sight, the bride turned to the Duke's falconer, who rode near her, and with eager interest asked him a hundred questions of the new country to which they were going. What were the people like? How did they live, and were they all happy? And the trees and the flowers, did they grow like these? And the Duke's castle, how old was it and how big? She would like to have made the same enquiries about the Duke, that noble bridegroom round whom her dreams had clustered, but felt it would not be befitting. The guardian had merely said he was the son of his old friend, of most ancient lineage and great wealth; but she knew of course he must be young and handsome and brave as a lion, as a noble bridegroom should be. So she would love him with all her heart, and his love for her would be like that of the noble Charle-

magne for Fastrada, his queen. They would be so happy that happiness would be shed on all their people too in that north country.

The big falconer looked at the little lady so full of life and joy and hope, and thought a good deal before he answered her questions. He was by nature slow of speech, but what he said could be trusted. He answered that the Duke's castle was very fine and very old, and the walls so thick the depth might be measured by the height of a man tall as himself. The Duke's lands stretched far as the eye could see when you stood on the high tower. Hills and forests full of deer, and great mining plains where the people burrowed deep into the earth for the silver, coal, and salt which brought riches to the Duke. All belonged to him far and wide till you came to the shining belt of the great Baltic.

The eyes of the future mistress of all this wealth gleamed with delight — so much for her to do, so many poor to make happy, for every one of her people should be happy. Jacynth listened with admiring sympathy to her little lady's glowing schemes ; she too felt like a young skylark soaring up into the blue for the first time.

Both were sorry when the last day of the journey dawned. They would like to have ridden so, on and on, right round the world in that lovely month

of May. About midday Max pointed out a high tower rising out of the trees on the distant hills. Three hours more and they would reach the castle, he said. A messenger had gone on before at dawn to prepare the Duke for the bride's arrival.

It was somewhat stern and cold, this north country, with its rugged rocks and tall, straight pines. A great bird flew overhead; Max said it was an eagle. The green valley and the white convent seemed a long way off.

As they neared the castle, which, grim and towering, frowned down from its rocky heights, a great company of serfs, thralls, and dependants of the Duke came out in solemn array to greet them. Each man was dressed in his gala costume, and as the bride passed they bowed low; they did not cheer and sing, as the bride would like to have heard them do, for the Duke disliked all singing, even that of birds, as she learned afterwards.

Then all at once the heart of the bride stood still, for Max said low, "The Duke — and the Duke's mother." And stepping towards her came a spare, shrivelled little man with face and hair straw-colour, and high nose like a beak, followed by a lady the counterpart of himself except for the deeper lines and deeper yellow hue of some thirty added years. With slow and solemn strut the pair advanced and bade her welcome in set voice,

smiling and bowing like figures with machines inside them. The little bride felt as if a cold east wind were blowing the sun out of the sky, but she sprang from her horse and made a low curtsy first to the Duke — ah me, to think this was the bridegroom! — and then to his lady mother.

Then the chief horseman Karl, big, strong, and fair as a Viking, came up and led away her horse, and as he patted him with friendly hand the new little Duchess thanked him with such a smile as made of Karl a proud man that day. Then and there he vowed himself, as had Max already, to her service. The rusty portcullis creaked, the grim old castle opened wide its great jaws, and the Duke led his bride into her new home.

The marriage ceremony in the castle chapel and the wedding feast which followed in the great banqueting hall were both most awful and solemn functions. The bride soon realised that it was no laughing matter to become a Duchess. For the first two or three days her face stopped smiling. Jacynth's heart sank at the change in her young mistress. But the little Duchess was so brimming over with life she soon began to cheer up — like a bird who even in a cage must be happy and sing.

So after a few days she raised her head and shook out her wings and tried a short fly; but to her dismay whichever way she turned the bars of

the cage were there to stop her. She would go out into the castle grounds or wander about the pine forest. "Impossible," said the Duke. "Absurd," said the old Duchess. "Whoever thought of doing such a thing! Three o'clock is the hour for taking the air, and then you ride or drive abroad suitably attended, and all is done with due preparation. In the forenoon it has ever been the custom for the ladies of this noble house to sit at their tapestry frames," said the Duke with a wave of his small, bony hand, which signified his final commands.

The little bride gazed from her windows over the country where day and night they toiled in the deep mines. She would like to know how those men lived down there in the dark, deep passages they cut through the earth. Karl told Jacynth there were often accidents, men terribly hurt, sometimes killed. And these people belonged to the Duke, worked and risked their lives in his service. She would go down and know them and their wives and little children. But when she spoke of this, "Impossible," said the Duke; and "Ridiculous," snapped out the old Duchess; "a most wild, improper notion."

It was so with everything. She might not even water the flowers. Her only duty was to stand or sit on state occasions at the Duke's side. Like

the banners and trophies hung on the wall, she must be in her place and never move except when duly ordered.

The Duke did everything by rule. He ate, drank, rode, hunted, prayed, and slept by regular rote. In all matters he consulted either the calendar or the records of his ancient house. What had not been done by his forefathers must never be done at all. The Middle Ages were good enough for him and his House.

So the little Duchess grew pale and thin, her spirit bruised and weary from beating itself vainly against the iron bars. She looked back on her life in the happy, busy convent as the free, wide life of the world compared to that of the grim old castle, in which not only her body but her very soul was imprisoned.

Jacynth sighed to see the sunny head of her little lady drooping like a pale crocus, just for want of heaven's fresh air and freedom. Her faithful eyes followed her continually and watched over her all the long, dreary hours. Not that the hours were dreary to Jacynth, however. A balcony went round the lady's chamber, a balcony easy to clamber. Jacynth, to be within call, was wont to take her needlework at times and sit outside, and it was strange how often it happened that Karl chanced to be passing in the garden

below. What more natural than that he should look up and enquire if there was anything he could do for the young Duchess or any little service he could render to Mistress Jacynth herself? For the very first glance from her soft, dark eyes had caused Karl to forget all the blue ones of his own north country. Sometimes it happened he had a few minutes to spare — time just to climb up to the balcony and tell Jacynth for the hundredth time how beautiful and adorable she was. And Jacynth would answer she was much too busy to listen to such nonsense; but she wore the flowers he brought her, and her heart sang a sweet, low song to itself all day, in spite of the gloomy old castle and her anxiety at the pale cheek of her mistress.

CHAPTER II

THE brief summer faded and autumn came round. One day the Duke announced that according to ancient usage it was now the season for a hunt. He took no pleasure himself either in hunting or the chase, but since these were customs of the good old days they must be kept up with due ceremony and pomp. Having unearthed an old chronicle describing a stag-hunt three hundred years back, he ordered all to be carried out in the same fashion. Karl laughed as he told Jacynth how the Duke was terribly put out because he could not rule the path the stag should follow. Now, in this same parchment it was written how the lady of the castle was wont to follow on her jennet, and, riding up at the death, present to her lord a ewer and towel, that he might wash his noble hands. This picture struck the Duke's fancy mightily, and he forthwith summoned the little Duchess and told her graciously this privilege should be hers on the morrow.

To his amazement, however, she began to excuse herself, lifting a white little face and plead-

ing weariness, sickness, and finally declared she much preferred remaining at home. The Duke answered nothing; he just looked at her as he would have looked at a chicken suddenly offering objections to being served for his table. Then he called his lady mother, who was listening in the adjoining room, and requested she would inform this strangely ignorant lady of the duties expected of her as his Duchess. The old lady had no objection to the task; on the contrary, her yellow face lit up with pleasure as she attacked her victim in awe-inspiring tones, and the Duke stalked away, feeling very important and dignified. But great was his mortification when some hours later his lady mother informed him that all her rating had been in vain. The "little rebel" would not give way an inch, threatened to faint at the sight of a dying stag, perhaps to drop the ewer, and in fact to make herself generally such a nuisance as to spoil the whole performance. "So I much fear," concluded the old Duchess, "it would not be safe to force her attendance. She is spiteful enough, the little cat, to faint or even die, to annoy us!"

The Duke was in high dudgeon, and the young Duchess was banished to her own apartments in disgrace.

Early next morning the hunting party rode

forth to the blowing of horns, the yelping of hounds, and all other appropriate sounds inscribed in the ancient chronicle; but the Duke bit his lips with vexation that the duty of following with ewer and towel had to devolve upon the old Duchess.

As the morning sun pierced through the veil of mist lying like a white sheet of wool all over the plain, a troop of gypsies came in sight, headed by a bent old crone who advanced to the Duke, craving his usual bounty and patronage for her tribe — they had come, she said, hearing of his marriage, to pay their respects to the new Duchess.

The Duke, being in no very amiable mood, was about to dismiss the old gypsy with a curse, when suddenly an idea occurred to him. Yes, the old crone should go and visit the bride! Perhaps the sight of this ugly old witch would give her a fright and bring her to a more humble frame of mind, especially if she prophesied awful calamities sure to befall a lady who incurred her lord's displeasure. He leant over in his saddle and spoke low to the ancient dame. She nodded her head, and her deep-set eyes glittered oddly at his words. "Oh, yes, surely," she would do all the noble Duke desired.

So Karl was bidden stay behind and conduct this visitor to his mistress.

Now, Jacynth had noticed the gypsies' camp down on the plain, and for three days past had plagued Karl to let the gypsies tell both his fortune and hers. But Karl, fearful lest their silly fortune-telling might prophesy another than himself as husband of Jacynth, had refused to have any hands with such rubbish. When, therefore, Jacynth saw him coming with the gypsy she welcomed both with delight. It would divert her poor little lady, and, after she had finished with her, Karl must have his fortune told or know that Jacynth would never speak to him again. Of course Karl promised everything in face of such a threat. Meanwhile, bidding Jacynth usher in the crone, he took up his stand on the balcony outside, for he mistrusted that ugly smile of the Duke's as he rode off.

How long he stood there, watching the weather and getting occasional glimpses of the hunt, Karl never knew. Suddenly he was roused by a sound from within like low, soft singing. He pushed the lattice, and, pulling the curtain, peeped in. There on the floor, with her head near the door, lay Jacynth, fast asleep, a smile playing round her pretty lips. "A nice watch she is keeping," thought Karl, vexed at her looking so happy in his absence. And then what he saw made him forget even Jacynth in his astonishment; for on the

seat of state sat a queenly woman, and at her feet the little Duchess, with head upraised, flashing eyes, and parted lips which seemed to be drinking in the sound of that strange, sweet song as if it were the water of life. Karl stopped amazed and held his breath. The old crone he admitted had vanished. In her place sat a woman, strong and beautiful, upright as a pine. The ragged locks, which had almost concealed her face, were flung back; the eyes, sunk before into the back of her head, now flashed and shone like pools in sunlight. Her garments, instead of grey tatters and shreds, had turned to wondrous draperies, embroidered with strange devices and edged with glittering coins. Truly this was a witch, and no mistake!

Karl would have rushed in to deliver his mistress from the spell which was clearly bewitching her, but that something in her face made him hold back. If this was witchery, then surely witchery was no evil, but a thing greatly to be desired. The poor, pale, drooping little lady of an hour ago was also transformed. She was again the bright, joyous maiden who had ridden up to the grim old castle on that May morning. The rose-colour was in her cheeks, the light in her eyes, her breath came quickly as one who draws in draughts of heaven's fresh, free air after long days in a stifling prison.

Karl wondered greatly what the gypsy had been saying. He listened now with all his ears, but found it hard to follow at first.

Then he seemed to get caught on the stream that flowed from those mysterious lips, he too, and the words the gypsy spoke swept him on till he forgot time, place, and all around him save that voice.

She spoke of life, such a life as Karl had never dreamed. Free, glorious, full to the brim; of love, undying, devoted, perfect in sympathy and understanding; of toil and labour made easy and light by sweet companionship and mutual help; of noble work to be done in a world where each one's work was needed, each working for the good of all. This was the life she promised, and much more besides, to her who should have the courage to join the kindred to whom in heart and soul she truly belonged. It sounded like a song of victory, — victory after a great conflict, and Karl felt as though wings were suddenly stirring and sprouting beneath his jerkin.

Then the sound of the strange voice changed once more, reminding Karl of solemn music at vespers. "Then at the last shall come old age," sang the gypsy, but there was nothing of gloom or sadness in the picture her song conjured up; it was the beautiful sunset, full of peace and re-

pose, whose rainbow colours hold the promise of a still more glorious dawn. "Death touches the worn-out body, and with the might of his sun-beam the soul awakes, — awakes to the new life for which this has been but the preparation."

Never had Karl heard anything like it before, but the words remained with him all his life.

And as he stood between the curtains, unheeded, bewildered, and entranced, the gypsy rose, gathering her cloak about her. He realised suddenly that she was going, and the Duchess with her. For a moment Karl thought of trying to stop his mistress, but a glance at her face made him resolve instead to do her bidding and follow her, should she need his service, even to the ends of the earth. Leaving Jacynth still asleep on the floor they passed down the stairs, the Duchess bidding Karl lead the way to the stables. When there she ordered her own palfrey to be saddled, the one on which she had ridden from her convent home. All was done swiftly and noiselessly. Then, as he lifted her into the saddle and the gypsy sprang up behind her, Karl begged her remember he was ready at one word to follow on his strong, red horse wherever she would go. And at his eager words of devotion the little Duchess looked down on him and smiled. Karl told Jacynth afterwards it was a smile which made him feel as if she had

crowned him. But that was not all, for she placed in his hand a tiny keepsake more precious to Karl than a handful of diamonds, a little curl of sunny hair from her own fair head, tied with a scrap of the ribbon round her neck. It was the only thing she had to give! Then, shaking the reins lightly, she bounded out of the castle gates and out of Karl's life.

CHAPTER III

THERE was a fine hue and cry when, on the Duke's return from the hunt, it became known that the Duchess had flown, whither, how, or why, nobody knew. Karl, summoned before the presence of his infuriated master and the old Duchess, confessed in a stupid, stolid tone of voice all he knew, which threw little light on the matter, as he took good care. At the command of his young mistress he had saddled the palfrey, on which she and the gypsy had ridden forth. He had not enquired whither, considering such a question unbefitting his station. The Duchess had forbidden him to follow, requiring, she said, no attendant.

The country round was scoured high and low, but no trace was ever found either of the little Duchess or of the gypsies. The earth seemed to have opened and swallowed them up.

The Duke did not search long; it was, he considered, beneath his dignity. A young woman of such low tastes was evidently quite unsuited for the exalted position of his wife. She had dis-

graced herself hopelessly, and in no case could he have allowed her to resume her former high state. It really would have been most difficult to know what to do with her, and after a time he came to be as thankful as was the old Duchess that the search had not proved successful. The dowager resumed the reins of mistress, which in practice she had never dropped, and held them with a grip so firm nothing but death at a ripe old age caused her to relax.

Karl wore the precious gift of the little Duchess next his heart always. When Jacynth became his wife she often grumbled at this habit. If a man had a fancy for keeping locks of hair, let it be the hair of his own wedded wife, said that lady, with a toss of her pretty dark head. No one could have loved her mistress better than she, but she never dreamed of such folly as wearing locks of her hair. And when to all this Karl made no answer save to press his hand over a certain spot of his tunic Jacynth would threaten to get a lock of hair on her own account, of some one who would be only too proud to give it, and just see how Karl would feel about it. "But she never does it," Karl would laugh, "so I do not yet know how to feel about it."

Karl never left the service of the Duke, notwithstanding the disgrace in which he found himself for many a long day after the flight of the Duchess.

The Duke and his noble house had received an insult which Karl, the "idiot varlet," ought to have prevented, any other idiot varlet would have done so! But Karl was born on the place, as his fathers for generations before him; he was as deeply rooted as one of the big forest trees, and could not have grown elsewhere if he tried. He did not find it very hard to persuade the fair Jacynth to share his cottage in the wood, and they dwelt there for more happy years than fall to the lot of most people either in castles or cottages. Children were born to them, and Jacynth, content and happy in the love of her home, seldom remembered her long-lost mistress. Had it not been for the lock of hair kept so faithfully by Karl she would have thought of her even less. But Karl in his heart kept her memory ever fresh and green as on that autumn day she rode away. When alone at his work, in thought he would follow her away, away round the world, together with the strange, mysterious gypsy woman. Where on this earth was she dwelling? And had the free, glorious life promised by the gypsy opened out to her at last? Deep in his heart Karl nursed a wild desire to start off some day and seek his lost Duchess through every land until he found her, looked upon her face once more, and assured himself that she was happy. But this dream was so impossible

to put in practice Karl would not even have whispered it to Jacynth, his sensible little wife.

So the years went by. Young people grew old, old people passed away. Death came to that happy cottage in the wood, and Jacynth, the faithful companion through many years of joy and sorrow, followed where first one child and then the other led the way. Karl found himself alone at last, an old man with white hair and bent shoulders.

The Duke had gradually dried up, withered away. So little had he been alive for the last ten years of his life, one could scarcely say he died. A distant kinsman inherited the property and carried on the name of the noble House. Karl planted a wild rose on Jacynth's grave and felt there was now but one thing more to do before he too was ready for what the gypsy had called the "touch of Death's sunbeam." With a stout leather purse, a javelin for staff, a traveller's cloak, and a skinful of good Cotnar wine he one day started off on his pilgrimage.

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Karl never returned to the north country to tell whether or not he found his Duchess.

When the neighbours spoke of him they shook their heads, saying, "'Twas a fool's errand to set out on such a quest;" but so said many who

stayed at home to those knights who set out in search of the Grail. And one thing is sure, if Karl did not find his Duchess before, he certainly found her after Death touched him "with the might of his sunbeam."

A Hero's Mother



A Hero's Mother

CHAPTER I

A LONG, long time ago there lived a Princess called Tamineh. She was young and fair as a morning in May, and dwelt in a land of sunshine and roses. Her father, the King of Samengan, had no other child, and Tamineh, with her laughing, dark eyes, her blue-black curls, and soft, velvety voice, was the joy and pride of his heart.

Many suitors came to woo the fair Tamineh, but she would look at none of them. "There is but one whom I will marry," she would say, half laughing, half earnest, "and that is Rustem, the champion of the world."

Now Rustem was the great Persian chief, the fame of whose valiant deeds and heroic feats had spread all over the world, and that he would ever come to the small kingdom of Samengan or even so much as hear of Princess Tamineh seemed most unlikely.

"Set not thy heart on the distant star, foolish child," said the King. But he did not force her, as many kingly fathers would have done, to marry against her wish. The fact was, Tamineh, in spite of her sweet, soft looks, had a strong will, and the King, who loved peace and a quiet life, never contradicted her in any matter.

From a child Tamineh had heard of Rustem, for her nurse Fatima, who was a Persian, loved nothing better than to talk of the great hero of her country. Tamineh would sit quiet for hours while Fatima related the mighty deeds of Rustem, how when only eight years old he slew the White Demon, and at sixteen fought in single combat against the champion of the Tartars, and conquered every other warrior who stood up against him. "I will marry Rustem and none other," said Tamineh even in her nursery days, and as the years went on and she grew into a tall, beautiful maiden, Rustem was still her hero, the only man to whom she ever gave a thought.

One day Fatima brought Tamineh wonderful news. A traveller just arrived at the court of Samangan reported that Rustem, the mighty Persian lord, had been seen hunting wild asses in the great salt plains on the borders of the kingdom. Nay, more, the traveller declared he him-

self had encountered a party of huntsmen, one of whom, mounted on a magnificent charger and towering in his saddle head and shoulders above the rest, could have been no other than the great Rustem, for he was more like to a god than a mortal man.

Tamineh listened eagerly as Fatima related all that the traveller had said.

"The great Rustem is travelling unknown and with but few attendants," said Fatima, "but no man can see the mighty Rustem and mistake him for another. In all the world there are not two such, nor, methinks, in heaven either."

"I will see Rustem if I die for it," said Tamineh firmly. "And thou, Fatima, must help me."

"Pearl of my heart — how is it possible?" cried Fatima. "The great lord is journeying north; he will neither visit the King nor delay his journey, were it ever so!"

But Tamineh felt the moment had come for which she had been waiting all her life, and, being a young woman of great resource, obstacles which might have dismayed smaller souls did not deter her. For a time she was silent, thinking hard. Then suddenly she said:

"We must take Rakush captive. Rustem will then come and seek him."

Fatima had often told of Rakush, the wonderful

horse of Rustem, his most precious possession on earth.

The idea of stealing Rakush was to Fatima as daring and awful an idea as to steal Rustem himself, but, knowing it useless to contradict her young mistress, she made no reply save a deep groan.

"Listen now, my dear, good Fatima," said Tamineh, ignoring the groan. "The plot is a famous one, and must be carried out to-night or Rustem will have departed, and then it will be too late. Send forth three trusty servants mounted on swift horses, tell them I will protect and reward them if they obey me faithfully. While Rustem sleeps they must entrap Rakush and bring him hither to the royal stables before dawn."

Fatima tore her hair and her clothes, wept and lamented loudly, but ended by doing everything her young mistress commanded, as did also the three trusty servants, knowing that any service faithfully performed would be well rewarded by Princess Tamineh, while it might be the worse for them if they refused.

Little thought the mighty Rustem as he slept soundly in his scarlet tent that night of the web a bright-eyed damsel was weaving around him. Even at that moment three dark figures were stealthily stalking Rakush, his horse. Rakush

was to Rustem more than friend or lover — gold or glory. For years past it was Rakush who had carried him through the thickest of the fight; Rakush by whose aid he had slain the White Demon; Rakush who again and again had saved his master's life. There lived not the man who dare mount the mighty charger, such a liberty he would have made the rash one pay with his life; but he was gentle as any maiden at the touch of Rustem's hand. At night he roamed free, sleeping where he fancied, never tethered by chain or rope.

The men who followed Rakush that night had no easy work in carrying out the command of their Princess; but they contrived it at last, and before daylight dawned the proud war-horse of Rustem was led gagged and blindfolded into the stables of the Princess Tamineh.

From her tower Tamineh watched them bringing Rakush along the moonlit road up to the castle. She had been far too excited to sleep that night, and so great was her joy when at last the great Rakush came in sight that, though he was tossing his head, stamping his feet, and snorting protests like an angry steam-engine, she would have flown down to welcome him with glad caresses had not the faithful Fatima urged that such a rash step might undo all.

When Rustem rose next morning and called to Rakush he received no answering neigh as usual. Thinking this somewhat strange, he walked on, calling louder, but still there came no answer. Then he and his servants, searching round, perceived the footprints of a scuffle down by the stream. The great hoofmarks of Rakush showed how he had plowed up the ground on all sides and desperately resisted his captors, but further on could be traced the steps of Rakush between two other horses, closely followed by a third—Rakush had been stolen!

The rage of Rustem knew no bounds.

"I will go at once to the King of this country," he cried; "he must give command to catch the thieves."

Great was the astonishment of the King when he heard that no other than the mighty Rustem had arrived at his gates and desired an audience on urgent business. He half expected to see the whole host of the Persian army at Rustem's back; it was a relief when the champion of the world appeared in a hunter's tunic followed only by a few attendants.

Gladly the King promised to search throughout his kingdom, if needs be, for the missing horse. The thief should pay with his head, whoever he might be!

The attendants of the Princess trembled in their shoes, but to disobey her commands would have been as bad, if not worse, than to risk the wrath of the King, who, on the whole, was a mild sovereign, more severe in word than deed. Besides, the Princess had promised that no one should suffer in carrying out her behests, and the Princess had never gone back on her royal word since she had lisped her first infant orders.

The King begged Rustem to honour him by remaining as his guest at least that night, until the messengers should have returned on the morrow, as he trusted, with the missing horse.

Rustem none too willingly accepted. He would greatly have preferred joining the search-party for the recovery of his beloved Rakush, but he felt it would perhaps be discourteous to the King, who showed himself so anxious to serve him.

That night, after Rustem and the King had banqueted together and Rustem had retired to the royal apartments set aside for his use, suddenly the heavy curtains were drawn aside, and there, standing before him, her veil but half concealing her lovely face, Rustem saw the fairest maiden his eyes had ever beheld.

He rose and came forward to meet her.

Tamineh bade Fatima, who had insisted on

accompanying her, retire and wait outside. The curtains closed, and she and Rustem were alone.

"Forgive me for disturbing your solitude thus, my lord Rustem," said Tamineh in the soft, velvety tones she could use so well when she chose. "I am the Princess Tamineh, daughter of the King. I come to crave your pardon for a great wrong I have done you."

"You, fair Princess! Have done me a wrong? Unless it is that your bright eyes have stolen my heart since you appeared before me like the vision of some fair goddess, I know not what wrong you have done me!" Rustem, though he greatly preferred the camp to the court, was not unskilled in the gentle art of love.

"Who knows but I would gladly add that theft to the other, my lord Rustem," replied Tamineh with modestly downcast eyes. "But it is I and none other who have stolen Rakush, your horse."

Rustem's astonishment was so great it was some time before Tamineh could persuade him she spoke indeed the truth. When at last he believed her, in his joy at knowing his beloved Rakush safe and sound, he forgot to be angry with the thief who had caused him so much trouble. Besides, after all, the thief had come to confess, and the thief was very fair to look upon, and had a voice which made a man feel as though he were listening to the magic flute of Orpheus.

"I will pardon you, fair Princess, only on two conditions — first, if you will let me look on the face of the fair thief; and, second, if you tell me why she stole my horse?"

"I stole your horse, my lord Rustem, because I would fain delay your departure until I had looked once upon the face of the great hero Rustem, of whom all my life I have dreamed, the only hero in the world to me."

By this time Rustem had come very close to the Princess. Praise was no new thing in the ears of the champion of the world, but never had it been offered him before with such a subtle charm. "The only hero in the world to her!" So she would have naught but the best! He liked that spirit, it was even as his own. "And now for the other condition — you have fulfilled but one, fair princess, and my eyes are hungry for the sight of lips which can speak words so sweet to hear," he cried.

But Tamineh stepped back quickly, drawing closer the long white veil which half hid her face.

"Nay," she said proudly. "That is a privilege I grant only to the man who weds me," and she moved towards the curtain as though she would go.

"Only stay, sweet Princess, and I will wed you

to-morrow if you will but consent ! ” cried Rustem impetuously.

The words were music to Tamineh’s ear, but knowing that no man, least of all a warrior, cares for what he can win too easily, she began to draw back. Not until Rustem, in whom contradiction ever roused a fiery purpose to obtain his will, had vowed again and again he would wed her and no other, and wed her too ere to-morrow’s sun had set, did Tamineh draw aside her veil. Then, before he had time to realise what she would do, she fled, leaving in his hand the veil, which Rustem in his eagerness had seized lest she should hide that fair face again too soon. “The pretty bird has flown, leaving its wing in my too rough hand, but by the sun, moon, and stars she shall be mine,” he cried.

Next day Rustem asked the King for his daughter in marriage, and so great was the excitement over the wedding, which he insisted should take place that very day, that Rakush and the commotion his disappearance had caused were almost forgotten ! He was safe, and that was enough for everybody except Rakush himself ; he felt sorely ill-used till, decked out in all his gorgeous golden trappings for the wedding ceremony, he had his master again on his back.

So Tamineh obtained her heart’s desire and wedded her great hero Rustem, and for one bright

summer month was as happy as it is possible for any one on this earth to be.

Wandering in the myrtle groves or strolling together in the shady forest, Rustem would tell Tamineh thrilling tales of his warlike adventures, and the days passed for both like a happy dream. Rustem at first thought he could never weary of such a pleasant life.

But before long he began to grow restless and desire again the life of warfare and adventure, for his soul loved battle more than all else on earth.

Tamineh felt the change in his heart before he spoke a word. And she was filled with sorrow, knowing Rustem would go and forget her, while she, alas, must needs love him for ever.

One day came a rumour that war had broken out in Persia. Rustem eagerly buckled on his sword.

"I must bid farewell for a while to thy pleasant land, O King," he cried. "My sword rusts in its scabbard, and Rakush, my horse, neighs with longing to bear me to the thick of the fight!"

Then he bid farewell to Tamineh, who wept and clung about his neck, crying:

"I know thou wilt never return to me."

But he bade her be of good cheer, for he would surely come back to her one day laden with fresh honours. And he gave her an amulet engraved

with a griffin and said, "Take this my amulet, and if a son should be born to us bind it always upon his arm, it will protect him from evil powers. This is the badge of Rustem and of Zal."

For Zal, the famous father of Rustem, had when a helpless infant been left to die among the mountain rocks. Here he had been found by a kind-hearted griffin, who took him home and reared him with her own young till he was able to go forth into the world. Zal and his son in gratitude to the griffin for ever after bore this sign as their badge, and Rustem had engraved it upon the famous amulet, which people declared endowed him with absolute powers over man and beast.

Tamineh took the precious amulet and sadly watched Rustem as he mounted Rakush and rode away through the castle gates.

Gaily Rustem waved farewell as he turned in the saddle and looked back. But Tamineh could not see his face for the sad tears which blinded her.

By-and-by came news of fresh victories of the mighty Rustem. His name as champion of the world struck terror into the hearts of his foes. And there came a letter for Tamineh, together with a present of three rubies of great beauty and three wedges of finest gold. But the letter said no word of Rustem's return, and spoke only of more battles and victories to come.

And Tamineh sighed bitterly, "Already his love for me is dead — dead and forgotten as last year's roses!" and she took no pleasure in the rubies and gold.

One day a little son was born to her. Then Tamineh felt new life and joy spring up in her heart. But she said to herself, "If Rustem hears he has a son he will surely send and take the boy from me to train him up as a soldier, and I should be left desolate indeed!"

So she sent word by a messenger who travelled to Persia, telling Rustem that a little daughter had been born to him in Samengan.

And Tamineh called her son Sohrab, and bound upon his arm the amulet Rustem had given her. And she kept for him the rubies and the gold Rustem had sent. And the boy grew up tall, dark, and straight as a young cypress. His heart was like a lion's and his foot swift as the wild stag. The old King his grandfather loved him right well, and as for his mother, he filled every thought of her life, both waking and sleeping.

Sometimes she would wish that Rustem might see this son, of whom any father must needs be proud. But her heart sank at the thought of her boy being taken from her, and she held her peace.

Tamineh loved Rustem still, however, though he had forsaken her, and often spoke of him to

Sohrab, telling with pride of all his valiant deeds. And the boy never wearied of these tales. He grew up to think no hero had ever lived on the earth equal to Rustem his father; and indeed the boy was not far wrong, for he was rightly called the "champion of the world." And above all Sohrab loved to hear of Rakush, the wonderful horse who bore his father so faithfully through the thickest of the fight; Rakush, who neighed for joy at the battle's roar, and plunged through the swollen rivers or the darkest forest jungle without flinching; he who was so gentle with his master yet so proud and fierce he would suffer no other hand to touch him.

And Sohrab determined that one day he too would be champion of the world and lead his armies to victory, overwhelming all the hosts of the enemy. Then would his mother be proud of him also, and her cheek would flush as she spoke his name. And perhaps, who knows, Rustem his great father might some day hear of "Sohrab" and rejoice to learn he had a son not quite unworthy of him.

The famous Tartar general Peran-Wisa had from his childhood taken great interest in the little son of Rustem. Whenever he came to Semengan he would make the boy go through his military exercises, and a word from him was worth a victor's

prize to Sohrab. Peran-Wisa promised too that as soon as he was old enough he would speak for him to the great King of Tartary, Afrasiab, and, if Sohrab could show himself fit for it, Peran-Wisa would recommend him for a command in the King's army. So the boy dreamed of battles and armies even in his nursery days.

Years passed, and still Rustem never came back to Samengan. Those brief weeks of love long years ago would have seemed to Tamineh like a dream, had it not been for Sohrab. But in Sohrab she felt she possessed for ever the best of Rustem, the hero's heart, the dauntless spirit — all she had really loved ; and the fierce man of war, who could leave her and live without her love, faded into the background beside the warm, living presence of the beautiful boy whose loving arms were round her neck, his lips upon her cheek.

So time went on until Sohrab grew into a strong, manly youth of seventeen, who could joust, tilt, hunt, and use both sword and spear better than any man in the kingdom of Samengan.

The Kurds and Tartars were carrying on a fierce war at that time against the Persians. Sohrab panted to be in the midst of it, and when he begged Peran-Wisa to ask for a command in the army of the great King of Tartary the old chief consented gladly.

As for Tamineh, she knew the time had come for her young eagle to go forth and try his wings, so, though her heart was heavy at his departing, she herself girded on his sword, and, giving him the rubies and the gold, bade him keep the amulet bound beneath his tunic.

Sohrab kissed his mother tenderly. One day he promised he would return to rejoice her eyes once more, with a hero's name and fame worthy Rustem's son. Kneeling then before his grandfather, Sohrab craved his blessing and swore to keep untarnished the sword and shield which the King had given him as a parting gift, together with the noblest charger in the royal stables.

King Afrasiab gladly accepted the service of the youthful Sohrab, and gave him a command in the Tartar army, bidding him heed well the counsel of his trusted general, the faithful and wise Peran-Wisa.

CHAPTER II

SOHRAB fought in many battles. All men spoke his praises and his fame spread far as a warrior. He never forgot Afrasiab's command, but sought the counsel of Peran-Wisa in all difficulties.

But, notwithstanding his victories and fame, Sohrab was not content. One great wish possessed him always, to meet his father, the famous Rustem, and win his word of praise. With nothing less in all the world would he be satisfied.

One night the army of the Tartar hosts lay encamped on the banks of the river Oxus. All slept peacefully in the tents while the sentries kept diligent watch.

Sohrab alone lay wakeful the whole night long. Restlessly tossing on his bed of skins, busy thoughts rushed through his brain.

With the first faint streak of dawn he rose and passed through the silent lines of tents till he came to the one set apart for the old chief. Lifting the heavy curtain he entered.

"I come to seek thy counsel, O Peran-Wisa," said Sohrab, and then made known the plan which had kept him wakeful on his bed.

He would fain do some great deed which should reach the ears of Rustem, his father, that father he sought so long in vain. "In single combat," said Sohrab, "I would challenge the bravest of the Persian lords to meet me, man to man. If I prevail Rustem will surely learn of it. If I fall no man need hear of me again."

At first Peran-Wisa was most unwilling to consent to Sohrab's wish. He urged him to be content with sharing the common risk of battle, which fell to all alike. Or, if he would seek this father whom he had never seen, seek him where men said he now dwelt, far off in Seistan with Zal his aged father.

But Sohrab begged so earnestly to be allowed to make the challenge that Peran-Wisa at last consented, though his heart misgave him. The two armies lay encamped not far apart on the banks of the Oxus. Peran-Wisa rose, and, taking his ruler's staff, summoned his herald and went forth. Soon the whole Tartar host was marshalled out into the plain. First came the King's guard in their black sheep-skin caps, men from Bokhara and Khiva, big like giants, on huge steeds; then the lancers from Salore and those from the Caspian, light men on swift steeds; and lastly hordes of wild horsemen

from mountain and plain, mounted on shaggy ponies as wild and unkempt as themselves. A mighty host, their arms all glittering in the morning sun.

And opposite formed the Persian army, bright in burnished steel, equally eager for the fight.

Then Peran-Wisa, making sign to his squadrons to keep back, advanced to the front, while the herald blew a blast on his trumpet to make known he had something to say.

Ferood, the Persian general, came forward to meet him, his long spear in hand.

Silence reigned in the two great armies as Peran-Wisa in deep, ringing tones offered Sohrab's challenge.

On hearing the name of their champion the Tartars cheered loud and long. No Persian, they felt sure, could match their young Prince. But the Persians looked at one another in dismay, and their chiefs took grave counsel together, for they knew of no champion to send forth against Sohrab. At last one among them, Gudurz by name, said to Ferood the leader:

"There is but one man who can dare to take up this challenge — that man is Rustem."

"Rustem! But he is not here. Since his quarrel with the King he dwells afar in Seistan with Zal his father. He cannot help us."

"Nay," said Gudurz, "but he is here. He came last night and pitched his scarlet tents yonder apart. I will seek him and see if I can persuade him to forget his wrath and take up the challenge of the Tartars."

Ferood agreed gladly, and, while Gudurz hastened off to Rustem, he answered, accepting the challenge and bidding Sohrab make ready and arm.

Now Rustem had pitched his tents at some little distance from the Persian army. He could not keep away from the scene of battle, though he told himself he would take no part, for he was grievously offended with Kai-Khosroo, the King of Persia. Once Rustem had been to Kai-Khosroo closer than a brother, but now the King had turned to other favourites, younger men; and Rustem, filled with bitterness, had retired to Seistan, where he lived alone with his aged father Zal. At the first report of war, however, he was impatient to be off, drawn to the fight like a needle to the magnet.

When Gudurz the Persian entered his tent Rustem rose and greeted him joyfully, both hands outstretched in welcome. "These eyes could see no better sight," he cried, and asked eagerly, "What news?"

Then Gudurz hastened to tell of the Tartars'

challenge and of the sore straits in which it had placed the Persians. "For," said Gudurz, "we have no man who can match this Sohrab. He is young and valiant. His foot is swift as the wild stag, his heart is like a lion's. Our chiefs are too old or else too weak. All eyes turn to thee. Come down and help us, Rustem, or we are lost."

But Rustem at first refused. "Let the young men rise at Sohrab's vaunts," he said bitterly. "The King honours only the young, and lets the older men moulder to their graves."

But Gudurz urged him, saying at last:

"Take heed, O Rustem, lest men say that thou dost shun to peril thy fame with younger men!"

Then Rustem, frowning with displeasure, consented to come, but only on condition that he fought unknown and in plain arms.

When Rustem appeared among the Persians they hailed him with shouts of delight, and their fears vanished at sight of him like dew before the strong rays of the sun; while the Tartars wondered much who this stalwart champion might be — fighting in plain armour, and giving no name.

The Persian and Tartar hosts formed two long lines, and down the middle the champions advanced to meet each other.

Rustem eyed with wonder the slender youth

who dared thus to defy all the most valiant chiefs. Who could he be? Where was he reared? And as he gazed at him a great pity filled his soul that this noble-spirited youth, so full of life and beauty, must shortly be lying on the sand, his life-blood flowing. Never had Rustem, the fierce warrior, felt moved like this before — and he spoke gently :

“The air of heaven is sweet, but the grave is cold. O thou young man, wherefore wilt thou rush on death? I am vast, and clad in iron, and tried. No foe has ever yet been able to withstand me. O Sohrab, be advised, give up this fight. Quit the Tartar hosts. Come with me. Be as my son to me, and fight beneath my banner till I die — ”

And when Sohrab heard the voice of Rustem and looked upon his mighty form, planted like a great tower on the plain, a sudden hope filled his soul, and running forward he knelt before him and cried :

“By thy father’s head, by thy own soul — art thou not Rustem, art thou not he? ”

But Rustem mistrusted him for these words. He thought Sohrab was cunningly trying to find out if he were indeed Rustem, so that he might afterwards boast that no one save Rustem had dared to answer his challenge, and he without

fighting had gone on equal terms away. So he turned and answered Sohrab sternly:

"Rash boy. Men look on Rustem's face and flee. Well I know if the great Rustem stood here there would be no more talk of fighting. But it is I with whom thou hast now to do. Renounce thy vaunt and yield, or else thy bones shall strew the sand."

Then Sohrab stood up, his eyes flashing.

"Thou wilt not fright me by fierce words," he cried. "Yet in this thou hast well said. Did Rustem stand here on this field — there were no fighting then! Thou art more vast and tried than I, but to whom will be the victory thou canst not surely know. Only the event will teach us in its hour."

Breathless stood the hosts as the two champions faced each other and the combat began.

Rustem's eye shot fire, and raising high his spear he hurled it down with swift, unerring aim, but Sohrab, quick as a flash, sprang to one side and the spear buried itself deep in the sand. Then with all his force Sohrab struck full on Rustem's shield, so that the iron rang and rang again. And Rustem, furious, seized his gigantic club, which no one but himself could wield, and with one mighty stroke he would have felled Sohrab to the earth had he not been again too quick for him and sprang to

one side. The club came thundering down, causing Rustem himself to fall forward and loose his hold on it. In an instant Sohrab could have pierced him where he lay. But instead he drew back, without unsheathing his sword, and implored his unknown foe to let the fight end there and make a truce.

“Thou sayest thou art not Rustem — be it so. Who art thou, then, that canst so touch my soul? Oh let there be peace 'twixt thee and me.”

But Rustem, trembling with rage and fury, would not hearken to his words — rather they increased his wrath and shame that he should owe his life to this youth.

Seizing again his spear, with taunting, bitter words, he rushed on Sohrab and attacked him with renewed vigour.

Then Sohrab saw that this fight must be to the death.

The din of their clashing arms could be heard from one end to the other of the standing hosts. The heavens grew dark and lowering, as though in sore displeasure at this unnatural conflict. The wind rose, and, moaning, swept over the plain.

Still they fought on.

Sohrab's shield was almost cloven by a terrific stroke from Rustem's sword; the iron plating flew, but the good steel yet resisted.

Then Sohrab with his sword smote off the proudly waving crest of Rustem's helm, that plume which had never yet bowed to the dust. Rustem saw it and clenched his teeth.

The gloom grew blacker, angry storm clouds rumbled overhead, and on a sudden Rakush, the faithful steed of Rustem, uttered a fearful cry, a cry so unearthly, so heart-rending, it sent a chill through the stoutest heart.

And still they fought on.

Again the spear of Sohrab smote with a crash on Rustem's helm; and this time the blade broke like glass into a thousand fragments, only the hilt remaining in Sohrab's hand. Then Rustem raised his head, his eyes glared terribly, and brandishing his spear on high he shouted "Rustem!"

At the sound of that name the heart of Sohrab stood still. Gazing bewildered he recoiled at his advancing foe, then dropped his shield, leaving himself all uncovered.

And in that moment the spear of Rustem pierced through his side.

Staggering back he sank to the ground. The thunder-clouds parted, the sun came out, and the two armies saw Rustem, triumphant and victorious, standing over the fallen Sohrab.

"Thou thoughtest in thy pride to slay a Persian lord this day," he cried, "and bear thy

trophies back to Afrasiab's land. Fool! Thou art slain by an unknown man." For Rustem's wrath was so great at having come near being defeated by this youth he would fain have deprived him even of the satisfaction of knowing by whose hand he had fallen. A small feeling to find its way into the heart of so great a warrior, and one he was soon bitterly to repent.

Sohrab looked up at him fearlessly.

"Thy fierce vaunt is vain! Thou didst not slay me, proud, boastful man. No, Rustem slays me. That loved name it was unnerved my arm, my shield dropped to my side, and thy spear pierced an unarmed foe. But hear me now, fierce man, and tremble. Rustem, my father, whom I seek through all the world, he will avenge my death and punish thee."

Rustem looked down on Sohrab coldly with unbelieving eyes.

"What talk is this of fathers and revenge," he said. "The mighty Rustem never had a son."

Sohrab answered, his voice growing fainter, "I am the son of Rustem, and no other. One day the news will reach him of my death and pierce him like a stab. Then he will cry vengeance on thee, fierce man. Would that I could live to see his grief and vengeance. Yet him I pity not so much as her, my mother — waiting for her Sohrab's re-

turn in far Samengan with her old father. Ah, what will be her grief when she shall learn that never can Sohrab return to rejoice her eyes once more?"

And thinking of Tamineh, his mother, Sohrab wept aloud.

Rustem was still unbelieving though not unmoved; for as he gazed at Sohrab, slain by his hand in the morning of his life, so full of manly strength and noble beauty, he could not but be touched with grief.

"Thou errest, Sohrab," he said more gently. "Men have told thee false—for Rustem never had a son—one child he had, and that a girl, who dwells afar with her mother and dreams not of us or wounds or war."

The anguish of his wound was growing great, and Sohrab longed to pull out the spear and let the life-blood flow, but first he must convince his stubborn foe. He answered wrathfully:

"Man, who art thou who dost deny my words? Truth sits upon the lips of dying men, and falsehood while I lived was far from mine. I tell thee, bound on this arm I bear the amulet which Rustem gave to my mother!"

Then Rustem became deathly pale, and his knees shook as he answered in a low voice:

"Canst thou show this? O Sohrab, that were proof indeed that thou art Rustem's son."

With trembling fingers Sohrab bared his shoulder, and there upon his arm Rustem saw the amulet engraved with his own badge of the griffin.

Rustem knelt and gazed long, speechless and trembling.

Then he uttered a great cry, "O boy, I am indeed thy father," and sank to the ground unconscious.

The dying Sohrab, too, knew the truth at last. This was Rustem, his father — the mighty Rustem. The spear still in his side he crawled to where Rustem lay, and, kissing him tenderly, tried to call him back to life. Presently Rustem opened his eyes, he gazed around him in horror and despair, great sobs shook and nearly choked him. Clutching his sword he would have slain himself had not Sohrab seen his thought and held his hand, speaking in gentle, soothing tones.

"Father, forbear. Surely our hearts cried out to one another, but it was writ in Heaven that this should be. O my father — let me feel that I have found thee. Come sit beside me on this sand. Take my head between thy hands, kiss me on the cheek, and say 'My son.' Quick, for my life is going fast."

Then Rustem's tears broke forth. He cast his arms about his son's neck and wept aloud. The hosts of savage warriors looked on in solemn awe, beholding Rustem's grief, while Peran-Wisa bowed his old head with anguish at sight of the young

warrior, who had been to him as a son, lying prone, his life-blood flowing.

And Rakush the horse drew near, gazing in silent woe from one to the other, while big, warm tears rolled down from his compassionate eyes.

"O Rakush, thy feet should have rotted in their joints before ever they brought thy master to this field," said Rustem, sternly chiding him.

But Sohrab looked up eagerly.

"Is this Rakush?" he asked. "How oft have I heard my mother tell of thee, thou brave steed. O Rakush," he sighed; "thou art more fortunate than I, for thou hast been where I shall never go, and seen my father's home at Seistan. The aged Zal himself has stroked thy neck and given thee food, and bidden thee bear Rustem well. But I shall never see my grandsire nor hear his voice!"

Then Rustem groaned and bewailed his son, wishing he himself lay dead, with the waves of the great river Oxus rolling over his head.

And again the dying Sohrab spoke to him words of comfort, bidding him live and in his old age reap a second glory of great deeds. And he prayed his father to ensure the safety of all the host that followed him, that they might cross the Oxus back in peace. "But me," he said, "carry with thee to Seistan, and mourn for me, thou, and my grandsire, and all thy friends."

And Rustem promised that Sohrab's every wish should be fulfilled, and he would build a stately mound above his bones, with a tall pillar rising high, so that all men might see it from afar and point to it as the hero's Sohrab's tomb, and so he should never be forgotten. Then Sohrab looked up and smiled on him, and slowly drew the spear from out his side. And the anguish of his wound was eased, for the blood flowed out. But with it his last remaining strength ebbed fast away, his head drooped low, his limbs grew slack. White and motionless lay Sohrab's beautiful young body, for the spirit had soared away.

Night came down and settled over the plain. A chill, white fog rose from the River Oxus, the moon came out, shining solitary through the mist; but still Rustem sat by his dead son, his horseman's cloak drawn low about his face, that not even the night might behold his woe.

This was the last that Peran-Wisa saw of either father or son. A sad and mournful duty remained to him, and as the armies moved to camp and lit their fires for the evening meal he mounted his horse, and, bidding his servants follow with the charger of Sohrab, he started on the long, wearisome journey to Samengan, where the mother of the young hero awaited anxiously her boy's return.

CHAPTER III

WITH Sohrab's departure the sunshine had gone out of Tamineh's life. The days dragged wearily, as though weighted with chains. Gladly would she have laid down and slept till that glad day when her boy would come back to her, a hero and a warrior well tried. But even at nights she could not sleep, her heart was restless and torn with anxiety, weary with the inaction of waiting, and often she would rise, and, going to her watch-tower, gaze down the moonlit road by which Sohrab had left and must one day return to Samengan.

The only brightness in Tamineh's life was the news which reached her of the growing fame of her boy. His valiant deeds had soon marked him out as one of the first among Afrasiab's young warriors, and as time went on his proud mother heard there were none, old or young, who could match with her Sohrab.

But still the fierce conflict continued between the Persians and Tartars, and Sohrab did not return to Samengan. Now and then travellers

arrived at the court who had actually seen Sohrab, a red-letter day indeed to Tamineh, but more often the news was only from travellers and merchants bringing reports of the war. The praise of the young warrior was on all men's lips, and the King of Samengan was proud to think how honoured was his grandson by the great King Afrasiab.

One night Tamineh had a strange and terrible dream. She saw her Sohrab lying stretched upon a plain. The moon looked down upon his pale, upturned face, showing a wonderful smile about his lips—a smile of perfect content and peace. By his side sat a dark figure, a cloak drawn low over his bowed head, still and immovable as the sleeping youth. Between the two were dark-red flowers growing, and beyond them flowed a great, silent river, like molten silver. But one of the strangest things in the picture was a gigantic charger, who stood near and gazed on Sohrab with big, mournful eyes from which big tears rolled slowly down, for this horse Tamineh recognised as Rakush. In all the world there were not two like Rakush, with the white star on his forehead, the proud, arched neck, and beautiful, flowing mane. Yes, it was the self-same Rakush she had stolen on that summer's night so long ago!

What could the vision mean? Tamineh, trem-

bling and pale with fear, rose and calling her faithful Fatima related to her the dream.

Fatima stroked her hair gently.

"Pearl of my heart," she said, "do not sorrow for a grief that is but a dream. Love and anxiety will often paint sad pictures while we sleep."

But, though these were her words, from that hour in her heart Fatima heard the slow chanting of the funereal dirge, the tramp of the mourners' feet coming nearer and nearer each day. That her mistress had seen with the eyes of the spirit a real picture of some actual scene far away she never doubted, and awaited with dread the news which any hour might bring. "For the silent river is death," said Fatima to herself, "and the red flowers in the sand are sown by the life-blood itself."

Travelling was slow in those days, but the funeral procession was daily drawing nearer, and Peran-Wisa would now soon reach Samengan.

One night Tamineh, feeling strangely restless and ill at ease, rose and mounted to her watch-tower. The moon shone so clear and bright it was light as day, yet with the magic and mystery of night. Tamineh drank in the sweet, cool air, and her thoughts went back to just such a night as this, long years ago, when she had sat up watching and waiting for the arrival of Rakush.

Yes, there along the white, gleaming road she could almost fancy she saw him coming now. She started to her feet and leaned far out, straining her eyes to catch the white star on his forehead, for surely there came Rakush once more. But as he drew nearer she saw it was not Rakush, but another and a lesser horse, riderless, and led by a man on horseback whose figure seemed to her familiar. Her heart stood still as the rider came on towards the palace gates.

"Sohrab is dead!" The cry was taken up and echoed through every corner of the palace, which was soon a scene of wildest grief and lamentation. The women tore their long, white veils and wrung their hands as they clustered round their unhappy Princess; for at the first sight of the face of Peran-Wisa, before ever his sad errand was told, at the name of "Sohrab," Tamineh, with a terrible cry, had fallen senseless at the feet of the old chief. They bore her to her room, and there for a time Tamineh lay as one dead. On recovering consciousness she sent at once for Peran-Wisa; she was calm and pale now as the marble statues in the court-yard of fountains.

"Tell me all," she said to Peran-Wisa. And the old man, bowing his white head in the presence of this terrible mother-grief, told her all. But, as he related how Sohrab had borne himself

in that last mighty conflict, Peran-Wisa drew himself up, and, head thrown back proudly, voice ringing triumphantly, he sang the praises of the young hero. Tamineh listened without moving, only her eyes flashed and dilated, while the soul, looking out from behind them, seemed to cry aloud with pride, joy, woe, despair, in turn. And those red flowers in the sand, the flowing life-blood of Sohrab, seemed to bring to her Rustem once more, — Rustem, the love of her youth, for surely their hands had met, and their spirits held a silent commune of speechless mutual woe, that terrible night on the banks of the Oxus.

Slain by Rustem! Sohrab, the son, who would have been to the proud, lonely warrior dearer than life.

To be slain by Rustem, the champion of the world, and slain in equal combat, was a hero's death, and worthy even Sohrab, whom no other living warrior could overcome. But for Rustem, terrible truly was the retribution his own deed had brought him. "Ah," thought Tamineh bitterly, "he forsook and betrayed love, and Heaven decreed that with his own hand he should destroy the sweet fruit of love, which he so gladly would have gathered."

Life held nothing now for Sohrab's mother. Night and day she mourned her son, distraught

with grief, her only comfort the horse and cloak which once had been his. Weeping, she would kiss the horse's mane and cling about his neck. At night she held the cloak in her arms and pressed its empty folds to her bosom. Night and day she mourned, neither eating nor sleeping, till her love for her dead son drew her spirit, like a strong cord, away from the weary body, away from the sunless earth which no longer held him.

And, seven days after Peran-Wisa's return with the hero's riderless horse, Tamineh had followed her Sohrab.

The Good Sister



The Good Sister

CHAPTER I

LIZZIE and Laura lived in an ivy-covered cottage on the outskirts of a fairy glen. Bees hummed round the honeysuckle porch and birds delighted to build in the deep thatch. These bright, light-hearted sisters were like two singing-birds themselves, and dwelt together in as perfect harmony as two soft, cooing doves. They had no one save each other in all the world, but they found that enough. Their neighbours were few and far distant, for the ivy cottage stood alone, the nearest house being a mile away.

But Lizzie and Laura were never dull or lonely. They were happy and busy as bees from sunrise to sunset. And what little maids would not be happy in a thatched cottage of their very own, with nobody to say "Don't." Nobody to scold if they came in late, and nobody to make them get up early, except the sun, and he did it so gently with his warm kiss on their eyelids it was impossible to mind him. So,

having no one to make rules for them, Laura and Lizzie made them for themselves, and lived as brisk, bright, and busy a life as though the eyes of fifty grandmothers peering through fifty pairs of spectacles had been incessantly upon them.

Not a sweeter, cleaner cottage or prettier garden could be seen in all that countryside. With the lark they rose each morning, milked the cow, fed the chickens, fetched in honey, swept the house. After breakfast one would churn and the other spin, and so the happy hours flew by till evening, when taking their pitchers they would go down to the brook, which wound its way like a silver snake through the haunted glen.

And every evening as the sun went down behind the dark pines the girls could hear the distant cry of the goblin-men:

"Come buy our orchard fruits. Come buy, come buy," while down the glen sounded the tramp and scurry of little feet.

Then all wise maidens filled their pitchers quickly and hurried home, for every one knew it was not well to speak with goblin-men, or even so much as look at their tempting fruits.

There was poor Jeanie, on whose lonely little grave no grass would grow, no flowers bloom, though Lizzie and Laura had sown the seeds with loving hands more than a year ago. Once

she had been the fairest maid in the village, her eyes danced with laughter like sunshine on the brook. But one sad day she listened to the luring voices of the goblin-men—looked at their fruit, longed for it, and then ate of it. From that hour Jeanie knew neither joy nor peace. Every evening she stole back to the glen, hoping to meet again the goblin-men, but, though she searched high and low till summer faded into autumn, never again did she see or hear a sign of them. A terrible longing to taste once more their fairy fruit beset her day and night. The light went out of her eyes, the roses faded from her fair face, and when at last the winter snows fell she drooped and died like some poor frost-bitten flower.

The sad fate of Jeanie made Laura think a great deal about the wicked goblin-men and their tempting fruit. She wondered often what it could be like that Jeanie should pine to death for it. Deep down in her heart grew the wish to taste once, just once, and know for herself the magic charm of this fairy fruit. Lizzie always fled at the first sight of the goblin-men, but often Laura had caught sight of grapes piled high in their baskets, and peaches and melons of such weight and size the little men seemed to stagger beneath them. And she would look back longingly, lagging behind her sister.

Then Lizzie's loving arms would infold her and her soft voice entreat:

"Come, Laura, come away; we must not look at goblin-men. We must not buy their fruit."

Turning away her own eyes she would hurry Laura home, clinging close to her, whispering in warning tones, "Who knows upon what soil they grow their fruit, the wicked goblin-men — their evil gifts would harm us, however tempting they seem."

But Laura thought to herself, "How fair must be the land where such fruit grows." And the longing to taste and see grew daily stronger.

One evening the sisters were later than usual at the brook, the other girls having all filled their pitchers and gone home. Suddenly the goblin voices were heard in the distance, nearer they came and nearer, while pitter-patter, scurrying feet rustled among the fallen leaves.

"Run, Laura, run!" cried Lizzie. "The goblin-men!" She started up from the brookside, where they had sat down to rest, and ran fleet-footed as a hare, believing Laura followed her.

But Laura did not stir. Her heart beat fast with fear and joy. Her eyes peered eagerly among the trees.

And soon they came in sight, a crowd of little goblin-people hurrying eagerly towards her, their baskets and dishes laden with fruit.

"Taste of our dainty fruit, pretty maiden. Come buy. Come buy." They pressed round her on every side.

The moon shone down between the trees and showed their tempting fruit,—grapes, peaches, melons, figs, strawberries, cherries, pears, and plums, every fruit from every land,—so fine and ripe Laura had never in her life seen anything to compare with it.

The goblins themselves were by no means so pleasant to look upon, and Laura felt somewhat afraid of them, in spite of their polite manners and coaxing tones. One had a rat's face with long, spiky moustachios and wicked little eyes; another had a pig's snout and a voice to match; others there were with faces of a cat, a rabbit, a mole, a weasel.

To their pressing invitation of "Buy, prithee buy, pretty maiden," Laura answered:

"Good folk, alas, I have no money; neither copper nor silver in my purse, and as for my gold, it is all on the furze yonder among the heather."

"Nay, but thou hast gold and plenty on thy head," cried the rat-faced goblin. "Buy from us with a golden curl!"

"Yes, she shall pay us with a golden curl," shouted all the goblins in a gleeful chorus.

Laura did not not like the bargain, but the fruit

looked so tempting and smelt so sweet that at last she allowed them to clip off one of her shining curls. The goblins waved it above their heads and laughed triumphantly. Then each one pressed his wares upon her.

Sweeter than honey, stronger than wine, fragrant as the apple Eve plucked in Eden, was the fruit of the little goblin-men. How much she ate Laura never knew. She did not stop to count, nor did the goblins.

"Just one more purple fig," they cried. "Just one more golden plum! Of fruit such as this one may eat all day yet never have enough."

When at last she turned homewards, Laura little guessed how the time had fled. She picked up a kernel-stone — all that remained of the feast — and like one walking in an enchanted land left the glen.

Lizzie met her at the gate. She was waiting anxiously, wondering what had kept her sister. When she heard Laura had loitered in the glen she wrung her hands.

"Oh, dear, you should not stay so late. Have you forgotten Jeanie — how she met the goblin-men, took their fruits and flowers, and from that day pined away?"

"Nay, hush, dear sister," Laura stopped her with a kiss. "Have done with sorrow. I have

eaten of those fruits, and ah, they were sweet beyond words to tell! To-morrow I will buy more, and bring some back to you. Such melons! such cherries and peaches, we will enjoy them together!"

But Lizzie shook her wise little head and sighed; she mistrusted the goblins and their wares, in spite of Laura's report.

That night, as the two golden heads lay side by side, wild dreams chased through Laura's brain, like fire the blood danced in her veins, and many a time she started up athirst for more of the wondrous fruit. But Lizzie slept sweetly and peacefully, never stirring till the first cock-crow. Then both maidens rose and their busy day began.

Lizzie went about her work singing like a bird. Laura worked too, milked the cow and fed the poultry, but in absent mood, longing all the while for evening. Never had the hours passed so slowly. But at last the sun sank down behind the distant hills, flushing the sky all rosy red. Then the sisters taking their pitchers went down to the brook in the glen.

When they had drawn water and Lizzie had plucked a handful of the long, golden flags growing by the stream she turned to go. But Laura begged her stay awhile, and said the hour was early yet. Why should they hurry home when

the evening was so fair? The dew had not fallen! And the bank was steep, she would rest. So she lingered and loitered, listening intently for the goblin-men, but no sign or sound could she hear. At length Lizzie cried:

“O Laura, we must come home! Don’t you hear the fruit-call of the goblins? — nearer they come and nearer. I dare not look, or I know I should see them. We must get home before the darkness falls.”

When Laura found that Lizzie heard the voices to which she remained deaf, her heart seemed turned to stone within her. Would she never hear that call again? Never more taste those fairy fruits? The thought was unbearable. In misery too great for spoken words Laura dragged her steps home. She crept to bed, and there lay silent by Lizzie’s side. But when her sister slept she sat up, and, clinching her hands together, wept and sobbed as though her heart would break. No sleep came to her that night; no peace or hope when she rose next morning.

So the days and nights went by. Every evening at the brook she listened, watched, and waited to hear again, if only once, the fruit-call of the goblin-men. And every evening she turned home sick at heart, knowing that, like Jeanie, she would never hear it more.

CHAPTER II

ONE day she remembered the kernel-stone she had brought home. Taking it out she planted it carefully by the wall facing south. Daily she watered it, often with tears, but never so much as the tiniest shoot appeared for all her watching and care.

Lizzie's tender heart was wrung at the sight of Laura's misery. In vain she tried to cheer her; plucked for her the sweetest flowers, bought the finest fruits on market days. But nothing could bring comfort to poor Laura. Daily she grew more listless. Her spinning-wheel stood silent. No longer did she milk the cow or feed the chickens. Day by day she dwindled away. Her cheek became hollow, her hair lost its golden hue, till at last she looked but a grey shadow of her former self.

Then Lizzie made a desperate resolve. She determined to seek out the goblin-men. Whether to do so were wise or foolish, for her own sake she no longer cared. Something must be done to save Laura, and there was no other remedy of which

she could think. So, taking a silver penny in her purse, she kissed Laura, and set out one evening for the glen to listen and to look for the first time in her life.

When the goblins saw her coming they chuckled with delight. "Oh, the prim, good Lizzie! see, she comes to buy at last! Even she cannot resist our fruit."

Leaping from the branches, hobbling over the tree-roots, springing out of every hole and bush, they came clustering to meet her. Chattering like magpies, they bewildered her with their noise, jostling and squeezing, hugging and kissing her. The more she tried to push them away the closer they pressed around her.

Fearing to offend them Lizzie tried to take it good-temperedly, but her patience was sorely tried.

"Have a bite at my melon! Eat of my peaches! See these plums on the twigs! Pluck them and suck them!"

Shrieking and yelling in her ears till she was well-nigh distracted, they all forced their fruits on her at once.

"Here is a silver penny. Give me as much and as many as you like!" cried Lizzie, when she could make herself heard. She flung her penny at them, and held her apron out for the fruits.

"Nay, nay," cried the little men, grinning slyly. "Not so. Sit down and feast with us. The night is yet young. Half the bloom and sweetness of our fruit would vanish were it carried away."

"I cannot do so," said Lizzie firmly. "There is one waits at home for me. I may not tarry with you. If you will not sell me your fruit give me back my silver penny and I will go."

At this the goblin-men looked at one another and began to snarl and grunt.

"Do you refuse to eat with us?" they demanded; "you proud, cross-grained, uncivil girl."

"Yes," said Lizzie; "I came only to buy your fruits. I cannot wait to feast with you."

Then the goblin-men became furious. "But you shall taste our fruits whether you will or no," they yelled, rushing at her madly like a swarm of hornets. They pulled her hair, they pinched her arms, stamped on her feet, and tore her frock. Some seized her hands and held them fast while others squeezed the fruit against her closed lips to force her to eat.

Bravely Lizzie stood her ground, sore beset by all these demons, but yielding not an inch. Her head erect, her lips tight pressed together, she uttered not a word lest they should force their fruit into her mouth.

Wearied out at last with beating and kicking,

scratching and pinching, all to no purpose, the wicked goblin-men flung Lizzie's penny in her face and hobbled off, cursing her. Whichever way they took, so great was their rage and disappointment, they left not a flower or shoot, but tore up the grass in their path. Then some plunged into the brook, some vanished into the ground, while others scudded away in the air.

When at last the place was clear of them Lizzie drew a long, deep breath of relief. Her face and neck were streaming with the pulp and juice of the fruit. Her limbs ached and tingled, her dress was torn to ribbons, her hair in a hopeless tangle, but she felt nothing save a great joy in her heart as she sprang up the bank and rushed home to Laura, fast as her swift feet could carry her.

"Laura," she cried, "come and kiss me. Never mind my bruises and scratches. I have braved the goblin-men for your sake. The juice of their fruit streams from my face and gown. Put your parched lips to it quickly."

Laura started up, her face white with fear.

"O Lizzie, Lizzie, have you for my sake tasted the forbidden fruit? Will your young life, like mine, be blighted, ruined?"

Sobbing, she flung her arms round Lizzie, kissed her and clung to her, while tears rained down her poor, shrunken cheeks. But they were refresh-

ing tears, not bitter and burning, such as she wept before. And, as her lips touched the juice which still clung to Lizzie, her mouth felt scorched as though she had tasted fire. No longer did she crave the goblins' fruit; rather she loathed the very thought of it. A maddening sense of her own folly swept over her. She beat her breast, wrung her hands, and rent her gown, like one demented. At last, her strength utterly spent, she sank back in Lizzie's arms unconscious.

The whole night through Lizzie watched by Laura, uncertain at times whether the end would be life or death.

But with the early dawn, when the first birds began to twitter their good-mornings in the eaves, Laura woke from a long, refreshing sleep, sighed gently, and opened glad eyes on Lizzie. All her youth and joy had returned, her curls shone bright and wavy, and she laughed in the old way as she hugged and kissed Lizzie in the gladness of her heart. Laura was saved.

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Years afterwards, when Lizzie and Laura had children of their own, Laura would often gather all the little ones around her and tell them stories of her childhood. And the story she would oftenest tell, and of which the children never tired, was

of the goblin-men in the haunted glen, and how her sister stood once in deadly peril for her sake and saved her by the strength of a great love. And Laura would wind up her story always with the same words, till the children knew them by heart and their little voices chimed in eagerly:

“ There is no friend like a sister,
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.”

The Serpent Woman



The Serpent Woman

CHAPTER I

IN the days when Jupiter held his court on Mount Olympus, there were dryads and fauns in the woods and nymphs and tritons in the streams. Satyrs, too, and winged horses still dwelt on earth, and many other wonderful creatures who have now, alas, completely vanished.

In the depths of a forest on the island of Crete there dwelt a strange and solitary serpent, gorgeous yet terrible to behold.

Once this serpent had been a beautiful woman, but she had so misused her power that the gods, who from their mountain-top kept a watchful eye upon the doings of men and women, doomed her as a punishment to be imprisoned in a serpent form. Only her woman's eyes and voice remained to her. And, since she had thought overmuch of her fair body, the father of the gods in his ire caused the serpent form to be of an awful beauty. The long coils were barred and spotted with vermilion, gold, green, and blue, and flecked with silver moons

that grew bright or dim at will. Upon her crest was a circle of stars which at night gleamed bright as diamonds. Never was seen such a dazzling, wonderful serpent, yet in all the world could no more miserable creature be found.

In the loneliest spot in the wood she dwelt, and sighed and moaned the livelong day. Her spirit, however, she could send with her thought wherever she willed. In this manner invisibly she visited many lands, sometimes wandering in the happy Elysian fields or soaring even to the Olympian heights, sometimes diving to the depths of Neptune's watery kingdom. But oftenest she sent her thought to her old haunts on earth. Silent and unseen she looked on at the feasts where she had once shone as queen — and her spirit was tortured with longing to escape from its imprisonment.

Now it happened one day that her thought took flight across the sea to Corinth. It was the time of the public games and chariot races, and Lamia knew the city would be given up to revelling and feasting. Standing unseen among the gay throng she watched the youths as they mounted their chariots for the great race. All at once she saw among them one who seemed to her like a young god; strong, tall, and fearless, with calm, uneager face, his fair head towered above the rest. At the mere sound of his voice his horses sprang forward,

their feet flying over the course as though shod with wings. Lightly he held the reins, his head thrown back, proudly indifferent whether he won or lost. But at all the games it was Lycius who excelled—Lycius who was crowned victor. Scarcely heeding the laurels gained so easily he escaped as soon as possible from his companions and joined an old philosopher, the sage Apollonius, his teacher and guide.

“Lycius! Lycius!” sighed the poor serpent. She had thought her cup of woe full to the brim, but now knew it held one drop more bitter than any she had yet tasted. She loved Lycius, and, alas, must love him ever in vain.

Then the fair goddess who is the mother of love, hearing those deep sighs which made moan among the forest trees, looked down with a frown and said sternly to the serpent Lamia:

“It is but just that thou in thy turn shouldst know the bitterness of love without hope.”

So the summer days went by and autumn changed to winter, and still Lamia dreamed of Lycius day and night, eating her heart out with vain longing and regret for the fair woman’s form that once she had.

Then spring again breathed over the land, and all the world rejoiced, save Lamia the beautiful serpent.

One day there came by a lovely nymph. Wringing her hands she sought about anxiously for some hiding-place, and seemed in sore distress. Lamia, feeling pity for her, asked the cause of her trouble.

The nymph turned with a start of surprise at the sound of a woman's voice from the serpent's mouth, but, on seeing the kind, sad eyes with which Lamia looked on her, she threw herself down by the friendly serpent and poured out all her woes.

Her trouble was she had so many lovers that nowhere could she find a moment's peace or quiet. Fly where she would they pursued her. Neither by land nor water could she be free from them — water-gods, wood-gods, fauns, satyrs, huntsmen, every being of the male sex, whether god or mortal, who beheld this bewitching nymph straightway fell hopelessly and insanelly in love. Her desire to escape them seemed to make her but the more attractive; for though she might have liked well enough a reasonable number of adorers, even as any other nymph, when they came to her by scores and scores they proved a grievous trouble. At every turn of the wood or bend of the river they appeared, till the poor little nymph had no pleasure any longer in her life. All day she spent in flying from their pursuit and trying to find some hiding-place.

"Dear Lamia," she cried, "wilt thou not help me? Thou hast kind eyes and a sweet woman's voice! Have pity on me."

Lamia sighed. Her trouble was just the reverse. A cruel fate denied her the one lover for whom she longed; yet, because her own sorrow made her pitiful, she agreed to help the nymph to the best of her power. Bidding her pluck some plants by the river she showed her how to make a magic syrup in which to steep her long, golden locks. This done she would become invisible to every eye, yet remain free as air to roam the woods and mountains and sport in the rivers and streams.

The joy and gratitude of the nymph were unbounded. She returned often to the lonely spot where poor Lamia dwelt to cheer her with tales of her adventures. For now she had a merry time, playing many a trick on her former tormentors. All unseen she would watch them seeking and calling her high and low, while she tricked them with an answering call and lured them to a fruitless chase over hill and dale, through swamp and tangle, till the sun went down.

But there was one among her lovers whom as yet the nymph had never seen. The young god Hermes, looking down one day from Mount Olympus, had beheld this most beguiling maid,

and from that hour the very goddesses seemed in his eyes dull and plain compared with her. Escaping from Olympus on the first occasion when the searching eye of the great Jupiter was withdrawn, he descended swift as a falling star to the island of Crete.

From vale to vale and wood to wood his winged heels bore him, but nowhere could he find the nymph. What had become of her? Jealousy tormented him to madness. Some wood-god must have stolen her. How he hated and despised all wood-gods! He hated even the very trees, for they had touched her fair head with their overhanging branches. In gloomy despair he threw himself down at last to rest.

All at once he heard a sigh which sounded like the echo of his own misery. He listened and a sweet voice murmured, "Ah miserable me! When shall I be freed from this wretched tomb; when be restored to my own fair form, fit for life and love and all delight?"

Moving aside the tall grasses Hermes saw to his surprise a wondrous snake, many-hued and gorgeous, with the saddest eyes he ever beheld.

Lamia, turning, knew at once the young god Hermes, by his winged feet and shining eyes lit always with the light of some new love. For Cupid, the mischievous imp, was wont to spend all

his spare time in aiming darts at Hermes, and seldom failed to hit.

"Fair Hermes, I had a dream of thee last night," said Lamia, and then related how she had seen him among the gods on Mount Olympus, the only sad one of them all, deaf to the soft song of the Muses, passing by the cup of nectar though handed by the bright-eyed, laughing Bacchante, mute and wrapped in gloom. "Then at morning I saw thee," continued Lamia, "break through the clouds and like a sunbeam dart down, striking for this island. Ah, gentle Hermes, hast thou found the nymph?"

"O wondrous snake with woman's voice, surely thou art inspired!" cried Hermes in astonishment. "Tell me only where my nymph is fled, and I will grant thee whatsoever thou shalt ask."

"Seal thy promise with an oath, fair god, and I will tell thee," answered Lamia, her starry crown and silver moons gleaming bright and large with excited hope.

"By my serpent rod, and by thine eyes and by thy starry crown, I swear!" cried Hermes.

Then Lamia revealed to him how the nymph even at that moment roamed not far off, but all invisible, her beauty veiled from the gaze of satyrs and fauns by the power of Lamia, the poor serpent who had taken pity on her distress. "But if, as

thou didst swear, thou wilt grant my boon, then," said Lamia, "I will cause that thou, Hermes, and thou alone shalt behold her."

Eagerly Hermes repeated his oath, and Lamia in trembling accents made known her petition:

"I was a woman once—let me have again my woman's form fair as before. I love a youth of Corinth, place me where he is."

Then quickly to seal the compact beyond recall she bade Hermes stoop while she breathed upon his brow, for even at that moment the fair nymph came in sight and he might now behold her.

Hermes lost no time in doing what she bid, and as Lamia breathed on him his eyes were opened, and he saw the sweet nymph he had sought in vain moving between the trees.

Quickly passing his serpent-rod round Lamia's head and murmuring the charm to set her spirit free, he hastened towards the nymph, who, all unconscious that she was no longer invisible, advanced smiling and secure. Great was her dismay, however, to find this wing-footed stranger all aware of her presence. With a cry of alarm she turned and fled. But Hermes, besides being swift of foot, was a soft-voiced god; he was young, too, and bold and tender, so before long he managed to quiet her fears, and won his nymph in spite of herself.

Left alone Lamia now began to change. Slowly one by one her silver moons waned and disappeared. The gorgeous spots and bars of many hues faded to a dark-red orange, hideous and revolting. Her eyes became fixed and glazed — the long coils writhed in torture. At last the starry crown vanished, and finally the serpent form itself melted into the air. Then with a cry of "Lycius! Lycius!" her freed spirit soared aloft, and the woods of Crete knew Lamia the serpent no more.

CHAPTER II

THE sun was sinking into a golden sea as the galley of Lycius with her brazen prow sailed into the Grecian port of Cenchreas.

Lycius and his companions were returning from the island of Ægina, where they had been to sacrifice and make their vows at the famous temple of Jupiter.

Lycius, weary of his friends and their light talk, set forth alone to walk across the hills to Corinth.

And as he went he wondered if Jupiter would heed his vows and grant his prayer. Lycius was a youth so favoured by the gods one might have thought little was left he could desire, save a continuance of their bounty. Apollo had bestowed on him a form of perfect manly beauty. Minerva had opened to him her secret treasures of wisdom. From Jupiter he had received honour, power, and wealth. From Venus all he would take of love and laughter. Yet Lycius was not content. He accepted the gifts of the gods only to weary of them each in turn, longing always with unrest for some-

thing greater, some gift perfect and divine, which should make him equal with the gods.

At the foot of the hills, beneath the pine-trees that fringed the wood, a maiden stood watching and waiting. She was fair and fresh as a spring flower, yet in her eyes there were depths which told of long acquaintance in the ways of love. Eyes they were like magnets, made to draw to them the hearts of men.

By her side was a clear pool. In its smooth surface she could see herself reflected. With delight she gazed down at the lovely face looking up to her out of the still water. "Lycius!" she sighed softly and turned to watch the path by which she knew he would pass.

Presently he came, wrapped in thought, looking neither to right nor left, passing close to where she stood. The hour for which Lamia had longed was come.

"Ah, Lycius, wilt thou leave me here alone? Lycius, look back!" At the sound of the magic voice Lycius turned. No need to call him twice. It seemed to him he had known and loved that voice a summer long, and when Lamia stepped from out the shadow and looked on him Lycius felt the gift had come for which he had prayed the gods.

"Leave thee alone! Look back! Ah, goddess,

see whether my eyes can ever turn from thee," he cried enraptured. Kneeling before her he poured forth his love and adoration. Was she a naiad of the rivers or a goddess from the stars? Whoever she was she must never leave him, for in the hour she vanished he would surely die!

His words filled Lamia with an ecstasy of delight, but seeing him so entangled in her mesh she determined to torment him awhile to bind him faster.

"If I should stay in these hills and vales of earth, how could I live?" she asked. "Thou, Lycius, who art a scholar, knowest well the finer spirits cannot breathe in human climes. Alas, poor youth, it cannot be—farewell!" Rising on tiptoe she spread wide her white arms as though to take flight.

Lycius, sick at the thought of losing his fair vision, turned pale as one about to swoon. Then Lamia, bending over him, pressed her lips to his, giving him new life with her kiss. "Oh, Lycius, I am no goddess," she laughed tenderly. "Raise thy head and look at me. I am but a maiden of earth, a maiden who loves thee, and has loved thee long."

Then, to the wonder and delight of Lycius, she told him in soft whispers of her love. She did not speak of her serpent life, but said she was a maid

of Corinth, dwelling retired and alone, happy as wealth could make her till that day when first she saw him.

"It was the night before the Adonian feast," said Lamia; "I saw thee leaning thoughtful and alone against a column of Venus' temple. Since that day I have wept apart; thy image only has filled my heart."

The stars looked down out of the summer sky and smiled and twinkled kindly eyes upon the lovers, while the trees scarcely whispered lest they should disturb their song of love. At last when the moon began to wane Lamia and Lycius rose and turned their steps toward Corinth. Lycius feared the road might be too long and rough for the soft feet of his love, but she by a magic spell caused the distance to diminish so that it seemed no farther than an evening stroll.

Through the city gates they passed and into the torch-lit streets, where rich and poor walked abroad enjoying the cool night air. Muffling his cloak about his face, Lycius avoided carefully being seen by any as he hurried along, clasping Lamia's hand in his.

Presently she felt his fingers tighten as one came slowly towards them, an old man with grey beard, bald head, and wearing the robe of a philosopher. His eye fixed on Lamia sharply as he passed.

She shuddered and turned suddenly cold. That keen, cruel glance seemed to freeze the warm blood as it bounded through her veins.

"Why do you shudder, love, so ruefully?" asked Lycius.

"I am wearied," answered Lamia. "Tell me who is that old man, and why did you hide yourself from his quick eye?"

"'Tis Apollonius," replied Lycius, "my trusty guide and good instructor. But to-night he seems the ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams."

Turning into a less crowded street Lamia now stopped before a lofty portal from which hung a silver lamp, lighting up the pillars and steps of white marble. Lycius wondered he had never before noticed this beautiful house, though many a time he must have passed it by. The doors were opened by Persian mutes, and as Lycius entered soft sounds of music as from a hundred harps greeted his ear.

CHAPTER III

DAYS, weeks, and months flew by, but Lamia and Lycius in their enchanted home took no thought of the outside world. And so they might have lived, happy in each other's love to the end of their days, had not a foolish thought got "buzzing" in the head of Lycius, which not even Lamia could drive out.

It began one summer evening as they sat together on the terrace of Lamia's magic garden. The air was sweet with the scent of roses. A nightingale sang to them a song which seemed the very echo of their love, when suddenly the quiet peace was broken by the sound of trumpets, distant at first, then nearer, as the revellers came down the hill-slope, passed up the street, and on into the city.

This sound from the almost forgotten outer world roused Lycius out of his dreaming. His thoughts went forth after his former companions. He longed to show them all what a prize he had won, that they might applaud his lovely bride and envy him.

Lamia, quick to notice any change in Lycius and seeing him lost in thought, trembled lest he should be growing weary of her love. She sighed, and gazed at him with sad, mournful eyes that would read his very soul.

"Why dost thou sigh, sweet love?" asked Lycius tenderly.

"Thou hast deserted me, I fear—and if I dwell not in thy heart I go forth houseless," said Lamia.

"Wilt thou know my thoughts? They were of thee—thee only, and how to bind thy soul to mine more closely," cried Lycius. Then he told her how he longed to show the world his fair bride—to parade his bliss before all Corinth, to see the streets thronged and hear the shouts of men as the bridal car of his peerless love drove by triumphantly.

Lamia listened, her cheeks paling. With tears she besought him to give up this idea. Were they not happy as few mortals? Why should they call in the outside world to behold their bliss? Surely it were too sacred a thing for the rude gaze of strangers?

But the more she pleaded the more perversely fixed did Lycius become. For, though a scholar and a hero, he was made much in the fashion of other men, and clung with fondness to his own ideas. Besides, Lamia in grief kneeling before

him, her eyes wet with piteous tears, was a sight he found altogether sweet and pleasant in its novelty. What delight there would be in comforting her presently!

So he feigned an anger he did not feel, and swore by all the gods that he would have the whole of Corinth to their wedding feast. Lamia, longing for his tender looks again, at last consented.

"But one thing I beg," she said, "if thou lovest me indeed as thou dost say, bid not old Apollonius to the feast. Ask all thy many guests as thou wilt, only keep me from him."

Lycius agreed, though much perplexed at her request. "Why not his aged friend?" he asked. But Lamia would give no reason.

"Hast thou no friends or kinsfolk to share our marriage feast?" asked Lycius.

"No, not one," sighed Lamia. "All our luckless house are dead. My parents' bones rest in their urns. In the whole world I have no one save thee alone."

CHAPTER IV

THE day arrived. The friends and kinsfolk of Lycius eagerly accepted his invitation, all on tiptoe of curiosity to see his mysterious bride, hitherto so carefully guarded from their sight. For long they had missed him from their midst, and wondered what had befallen him. Apollonius shook his head when Lycius' name was mentioned.

Lamia, seeing it was vain to try to turn Lycius from his purpose, set herself sadly to humour his whim to the uttermost. Everything should be done with a magnificence never before seen in Corinth. By her magic arts she caused the whole place to be decorated with the finest carvings, paintings, and statues that art could devise. The banquet hall and corridors were hung with garlands of loveliest roses, while palms and ferns arched overhead like a forest glade. From these hung silver lamps which lit with a soft, bright light the tables laden with a feast fit for the gods.

Lamia looked on sadly as her invisible messengers flitted to and fro obeying her commands.

A dark foreboding hung over her like a cloud. This dried-up old sage Apollonius, the thought of him troubled and haunted her, even though he was not bidden to the feast. She saw in him some ruthless machine, testing, weighing, analysing all things on which he looked. He who had unwoven the rainbow and set it down in a dull catalogue of common things, with his chill breath and steely eye would soon wither the delicate blossom of love. In his searching glance she read enmity and suspicion. To him she was still a snake, dangerous and ensnaring. He saw her past beneath the fair woman's form, and had no belief in her love.

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And now the guests began to arrive. Each one as he drew near gazed up at the portal in amaze. From childhood all had known this street, yet never before had seen this royal porch with its white marble pillars and steps. In they hastened, keen and curious to behold the inside of this wondrous house so mysteriously arisen in their city.

Among them came one who looked about him with calm and severe eye. He expressed neither wonder nor admiration, but now and then smiled to himself and gave a short laugh of scorn. It was Apollonius. Lycius, all smiles and welcome for his friends, met him in the vestibule.

"'Tis no common rule, Lycius," he said, "for an uninvited guest to force himself upon you. Yet I must do this wrong, and you forgive me."

Lycius, taken aback, could do no less than greet his old master, and with reconciling words led him through the inner doors, paying him every honour.

The guests as they arrived were shown into an antechamber, where beautiful slaves, after washing their feet and pouring fragrant oils upon their hair, robed each one in a white wedding garment of finest texture, such being the custom of that day. This done they all moved to the banquet, soft music playing round them, mysterious and invisible.

Throned like a queen sat Lamia, in her fair bridal array, looking the very goddess of love and beauty. Lycius' eye flashed triumph as he heard men praise her loveliness and saw the admiring gazes fixed on his bride.

Slaves in bright Eastern dress filled up the goblets with sparkling wines and the guests grew merry. Presently in danced laughing maidens, with baskets of golden reeds filled high with wreaths that every guest might be fitly crowned. Was it by chance that in the wreath of Apollonius were woven sprigs of spear-grass and the thorny blue thistle, and in the bride's wreath dark leaves of willow — sorrow's emblem?

The laughter grew louder, the mirth was at its wildest height, when Lycius seized a brimming cup and looking across to his old master desired to pledge him.

But Apollonius, deaf to his call and heeding nothing around him, was gazing with fixed and stony stare on the fair face of the bride, while she, white and trembling, looked back at the old man in piteous terror.

Lycius, alarmed, took her hand in his. It was icy cold. "Lamia," he cried, "what means this? Knowest thou this man?"

But Lamia made no answer. She seemed like one slowly turning to stone. Bending forward, Lycius looked into her eyes; they met his without seeing him.

"Lamia!" he cried in wild distress.

The music hushed — the guests turned to one another uneasily.

Still Apollonius held the pale bride under his fixed, cruel gaze. Whiter and whiter she grew, all her beauty vanishing, withering and fading like some fair flower before a scorching fire.

Lycius beheld her in terror and dismay; then turning with fury to the old philosopher,

"Shut those juggling eyes, thou ruthless man," he shouted. "Turn them aside, wretch, or may

the righteous ban of all the gods pierce them with blindness for ever."

But Apollonius remained unmoved, his piercing eyes still sending forth their destroying gleam.

Supporting his fainting bride in his arms Lycius cried aloud to the horrified guests :

" Corinthians, see, my sweet bride withers under the baleful gaze of that grey-beard wretch ! " Then falling down by her side he groaned aloud.

" Fool," muttered Apollonius, his eyes never one moment relenting. " Fool, from every ill of life have I preserved thee to this day, and shall I see thee made a serpent's prey ? "

As he uttered these words Lamia gave a deep, gasping breath as though a spear had pierced her to the heart. With an effort she raised her hand and feebly seemed to implore his silence.

" A serpent," repeated Apollonius in harsh, pitiless tones. And as he spoke Lamia flung up her arms and with a fearful cry vanished from sight.

Lycius found suddenly his arms were empty ; nothing of his fair bride remained save her wreath of flowers, which lay withering at his feet. Lamia had gone for ever.

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That night his friends laid Lycius on his funeral bed and wound his marriage robe around his lifeless body.

The fairy palace of delight and all its choice treasures had vanished with the bride.

Old Apollonius, as he looked on the spot where once it had stood, murmured bitterly, " Dreams and illusions ; verily, all is vanity under the sun."

**Minnehaha,
Laughing-Water**



Minnehaha, Laughing-Water

CHAPTER I

FAR away among the great forests and prairies of the Northland, before ever the white man had set foot there, dwelt the tribe of the Dacotahs.

They were a noble race, tall, handsome, brave as lions, and almost as fierce. Their shirts and cloaks were of the red-deer skin, on their heads waved bright birds' feathers, and a wild, free life they led in those good old days, hunting, fishing, and fighting.

Minnehaha was the loveliest maiden of the tribe. By the falls of Laughing-Water she dwelt alone with her father, the ancient Arrow-Maker.

Her mother had died before she could remember, but men said her beauty had been like a spring morning, and grief for her loss turned her husband to an old man. He built his wigwam in the lonely forest apart from the rest, and his little dark-eyed daughter became the one joy of his life. With

her he was never lonely; he called her after the waterfall, "Laughing-Water," and she was strangely like her godmother, wayward and bewitching, with her moods of shade and sunshine, her laugh like the rippling water, and her long, dark tresses waving and flowing nearly down to her feet.

In his youth the Arrow-Maker had been a great hunter and warrior. Now that he was too old to hunt or fight he made arrows for others, and as he sat working at the door of his wigwam he dreamed of the past great war-parties and lived them over again in his thoughts. His arrows were famous in all the land; none so swift and strong, none so finely wrought, with their heads of jasper, flint, and chalcedony. From far and near the warriors came to buy them, and while the ancient Arrow-Maker told of the fights of his youth, and lamented that there were no longer any such noble warriors, his visitors would steal glances at the lovely Minnehaha, flitting to and fro, and think, whatever the men of the past had been, no maiden was ever more fair.

Minnehaha loved to hear her father tell of those grand old times. She determined she would wed none but a hero like those of the good old days, and she gave neither a glance nor a thought to the young men who came so often to buy arrows from the ancient Arrow-Maker and to see the beauty of his daughter.

But one day there came to the wigwam a stranger, tall, handsome, and noble looking. He had heard of the fame of the arrows, and wished to purchase them. His quiver was empty, for he was returning homewards after a long journey. The stranger gave his name as Hiawatha of the Ojib-way tribe. When the Arrow-Maker heard this name he bade his guest warm welcome, for though still young the fame of Hiawatha had gone out in all the land. Even the Arrow-Maker and his daughter, in their solitude, had heard rumours of the brave and wise young ruler arisen like the morning star among his people to guide and help them. Had he not just fought the greatest fight of the day with Mudjekeewis, his famous father, the Ruler of the Winds ?

To the end of time men will remember that conflict, for such a one the world had never seen. Far away beyond the great wall of the Rocky Mountains, to the gate of the sunset, Hiawatha had sought out his father. His heart was filled with wrath against Mudjekeewis for the cruel desertion of Wenonah, his fair young wife, who in the years long back had died of grief, leaving her little son Hiawatha to be brought up by old Nokomis, his grandmother.

On the topmost peak of the mountains Hiawatha had found the mighty Mudjekeewis ; all the winds

of heaven whirled about him, his eyes gleamed like stars on a frosty night, his tossing hair and beard shone white as the untrodden snow. In spite of his wrath Hiawatha could not withhold his awe and admiration. When his son's bitter reproaches burst forth at last, the Ruler of the Winds had bowed his head in sorrow at the remembrance of his base and cruel conduct. But Hiawatha, burning to avenge his mother's death, insisted on the fight, and Mudjekeewis, desiring to prove the courage of his son, drew him on, though knowing well that being immortal he himself could receive no hurt.

Then Hiawatha, armed with his magic mittens, had seized the Black Rock, which he believed could alone injure Mudjekeewis, and tearing out huge blocks flung them at him with all his might. But the Ruler of the Winds blew a great gale from his nostrils and sent the rocks back on Hiawatha before ever they touched himself, and with the giant Bulrush he rushed on his son, lashing him with the strength of the tempest.

For three days and three nights did that conflict rage without ceasing or pausing. Then the mighty Mudjekeewis cried to his valiant son:

"Hold, my Hiawatha, for you cannot slay me, who am immortal. Bravely have you fought, and as reward I will make you, when your task in

the world is done, Ruler of the Home-Wind, which blows from the northwest, and sharer of my kingdom."

So Hiawatha went homewards with happiness in his heart, having made peace with his great father.

It was on his way back through the land of the Dacotahs that he turned aside to visit the wigwam of the famous Arrow-Maker. But not solely for the excellent weapons did he go there, and not for them did he linger in the doorway after he had bought his quiver full, and gaze back many times after he had said farewell.

When he had gone the Arrow-Maker talked much of Hiawatha: "There was a youth after his own heart! Courage and wisdom rare to be met with, vaunting nothing of his deeds of prowess, but modest, and willing to learn from those older than himself!"

Minnehaha sat and listened, but she said nothing; the Laughing-Water was still and silent, for once, as a forest pool.

From that time, however, Minnehaha showed much interest in the doings of their neighbours the Ojibways, and she rejoiced that peace had been made between the two tribes, for till now wars and feuds had been frequent between the Dacotahs and Ojibways.

Whenever travellers from the land of the Ojib-

ways came to the wigwam, Minnehaha would stand near and listen to all they had to tell, and when they spoke of Hiawatha her cheek flushed and her eye grew bright.

Many wonderful tales reached her of the great and valiant deeds of the young Hiawatha. One told how he had cleared the rivers and fishing-grounds, making a waterway for his people through the forest. Another how he had fasted and prayed seven days and nights, and the Great Spirit had answered his prayers by giving him a goodly gift for his people; a new food which was better than the fruits of the chase or wild berries of the woods, Mondamin, or the maize, it was called. Even now the Ojibways were rejoicing in the fields of golden grain, tall as a man and crowned with waving green plumes.

And another traveller related Hiawatha's marvellous adventure on the Big Sea-Water. How in his famous birch canoe, which skimmed the water like a bird, he set out alone to slay Nahma the sturgeon, King of the Fishes. Nahma, rising in wrath at being disturbed in his watery depths, had opened wide his great jaws and swallowed both Hiawatha and the canoe. Then, groping about inside the dark cavern of the great fish, Hiawatha found his heart, and dealt it such a blow with his clenched fist that Nahma leaped and staggered in

the water. A second blow made him gasp and quiver through all his mighty frame, and with a third Nahma floated dead and stiff upon the sea. So he drifted till at last Hiawatha felt the pebbles grate and knew the big fish lay stranded upon the shore. Then he heard the wild cry of the hungry sea-gulls, so he called to them to make an opening between the great ribs of Nahma and let him out. All birds and beasts of the forest obeyed Hiawatha and called him brother, so the sea-gulls, proud to do him any service, soon let him out of his dark prison. Then Hiawatha bade the people bring their pots and kettles and make oil from the great Nahma for winter use.

So was Hiawatha always doing some good thing for his people.

His last feat of all had been the slaying of the wicked magician, Megissogwon, he who breathed out evil fevers, disease, and death from the swamp and marshes where he dwelt. None before had dared to brave the ring of fiery poison-serpents who guarded Megissogwon on his Black Pitch-Water. But Hiawatha, armed with his mighty ash-bow and the ancient Arrow-Maker's weapons, had shot the serpents and cut his way through the Black Pitch-Water in his birch canoe, returning victorious, having slain the great enemy after many narrow escapes.

And the Arrow-Maker, listening to these stories, cried, "Would that we Dacotahs had such a hero amongst us!" And Minnehaha wondered to herself whether ever again the hero would come for arrows to the falls of Laughing-Water.

CHAPTER II

ONE day in early springtime the Arrow-Maker and his daughter sat working at the door of their wigwam, he making his arrow-heads of jasper, she plaiting busily her mats of reeds and rushes.

Suddenly they looked up, hearing the branches rustle as a light, swift step approached. There he stood in the sunlight before them, the tall, handsome young stranger of whom Minnehaha happened strangely enough to be thinking at that very moment, waving eagle plumes upon his head, a reindeer on his shoulders. He had grown handsomer and taller, thought Minnehaha, as following her father's example she rose and bade him welcome.

Hiawatha's cheek glowed as he laid his burden at her feet. He had walked fast, a mile at every step, since he wore his magic moccasins, yet the way had seemed long, so great was his impatience to hear once more the voice of Laughing-Water.

The ancient Arrow-Maker invited him to enter and rest, while Minnehaha busied herself in pre-

paring him refreshment in the comfortable and spacious wigwam. And as she waited on him, bringing food and drink in the best carved bowls of bass-wood, her father and the young warrior talked together.

Hiawatha looked often towards Minnehaha, but she spoke no word and asked no questions of him. It seemed to her like a dream that the one of whom she had thought so long and heard so much was really there before her, speaking with his own voice, and not in her thoughts only, as so often before.

He told them of his childhood, and of the wise old grandmother, Nokomis, who had been to him both father and mother all his life. And of his two great friends, Kwasind the strong man, and Chibiabos, the magic singer, he who could charm the birds from the trees. But of his mighty deeds, the slaying of Nahma and Megissogwon, he did not speak, and for this Minnehaha thought him a greater hero than before. She took up her mat of rushes, and sitting by her father's side she went on plaiting with swift and nimble fingers.

Then Hiawatha rose and stood before the ancient Arrow-Maker. He looked at the lovely Minnehaha, and his voice trembled a little as he said how he rejoiced that peace reigned between the Dacotahs and Ojibways, for the wish of his

heart was to wed the lovely Minnehaha, whom he had loved since that first day he came to buy arrows. And he begged the Arrow-Maker to give her to him for his wife, so that the hands of the two tribes might be joined for ever and they might dwell side by side as brothers.

The Arrow-Maker puffed away thoughtfully at his long peace-pipe, then he looked at Laughing-Water, and his wise old eyes read her heart before he answered slowly, "If Minnehaha wishes, I will give her to you. Let your heart speak now, my daughter."

Then Minnehaha rose, and, putting her hand in Hiawatha's, said in her low, sweet voice:

"I will follow you, my husband."

Never had any sound been half so sweet in the ears of Hiawatha as those few low words. They set his heart singing like a lark in the blue, and what he read in the lovely eyes of Minnehaha made him feel far prouder than after slaying Nahma or Megissogwon.

So the betrothal took place, and Minnehaha bade farewell to her father with tears and smiles like an April day.

Sadly the ancient Arrow-Maker gazed after them as Hiawatha led away his bride.

"Alas, my Laughing-Water!" he sighed. "Thou wert my sunshine, moonshine, firelight. Now is

my life left in dim twilight. But thus the young birds must fly away and build for themselves a nest." His eyes grew dim as he stood at the door of his wigwam and watched till the trees hid them from sight.

The journey homeward seemed far too short for Hiawatha, though he no longer walked with his magic moccasins a mile at a step, but very slowly, clearing the path of all that might wound her feet, lingering under the pine-trees lest his lovely Minnehaha might be wearied, and carrying her as if she were a feather over all the streams and brooks.

It was a pleasant journey. The forest friends of Hiawatha, the squirrels, rabbits, and hedgehogs, peeped out as they passed and wished them happiness, while the bluebird and the robin sang their sweetest song of welcome. The sun gave his blessing by day, and the moon and stars watched over them by night as they slept in the lodge of branches made by Hiawatha.

At the door of Hiawatha's wigwam stood old Nokomis to receive them, and at first sight of the sunny face of Laughing-Water she felt all her doubts and fears vanish. For old Nokomis had been troubled by many doubts about this marriage.

"Seek a wife not among another tribe, but among thine own people," she had urged her grandson. "A daughter of our own people is as

the firelight on the hearth, the handsomest of strangers is but as the cold starlight or the moonlight," said Nokomis.

But Hiawatha had answered that he loved well the starlight and the moonlight, and he would bring home a daughter to his dear old Nokomis who should be starlight, moonlight, and firelight, all three. For, though at other times Hiawatha had ever listened to the counsel of his wise old grandmother, he felt that in this matter the heart within him must give the wisest counsel, and his heart had spoken with no uncertain voice from the day when first he saw the Laughing-Water.

Never was known such a wedding feast as that prepared by old Nokomis for Hiawatha and his bride.

Messengers went round to all the villages bearing a wand of willow as sign of invitation, and eagerly the guests accepted. Every one honoured their hero Hiawatha by putting on their finest raiment, — belts of wampum, beads and feathers, robes of reindeer-fur and ermine, arms and faces painted with streaks of brightest colours, that all might look as gay and joyous as a field of poppies. The feast was worthy of the bridegroom and bride, and higher praise cannot be given. There were sturgeon and pike from the Big Sea-Water, haunches of venison and buffalo-marrow, beside

yellow cakes of Mondamin, the beautiful new maize Hiawatha had discovered for his people.

Among the guests came the nimble, handsome Pau-Puk-Keewis, he who could dance like a leaf in a gale; and the gentle Chibiabos, the friend of Hiawatha, whose music made even the birds pause and listen; and old Iagoo, the famous storyteller and traveller.

When the feast was over old Nokomis filled the pipe of each guest with rare and fragrant tobacco, and then she called on Pau-Puk-Keewis to entertain them with one of his famous dances. And the nimble Pau-Puk-Keewis, his face streaked like the rainbow, plumes of swans'-down on his head and tails of foxes on his heels, danced his famous "beggars' dance." The guests clapped their hands and shrieked with delight as Pau-Puk-Keewis pranced in and out of the pine-trees, first slowly, then faster and ever faster, till he whirled and twirled and leaped and bounded with such frenzy no eye could distinguish his head from his heels.

After this came sweet, soothing music from the gentle Chibiabos. Looking towards Minnehaha and the proud and happy Hiawatha, he sang a song of love and longing; and such was the magic of its spell not a guest present but as he listened felt himself grow young again, young and handsome too, even the oldest. When all had ap-

plauded and praised the song of Chibiabos, Nokomis begged her old friend Iagoo that he would tell one of his famous tales of wonder, for of all story-tellers Iagoo was the most marvellous. He could cause the very hair on his listeners' heads to curl up with amazement, while cold shivers of horror shook them from head to foot.

There was not a dull moment at the wedding feast of Hiawatha, though it lasted many hours. Like the rays of sunshine between the pines the lovely Minnehaha danced in and out among the guests as she helped old Nokomis to supply all their wants, and when the guests went home at last they all agreed that never was a lovelier bride or nobler bridegroom.

CHAPTER III

THE days that followed were happy and prosperous. The Ojibways were now at peace with all their neighbours, and the war-clubs and weapons were buried deep in the ground.

The men hunted and fished, and the women planted fields of the green and golden maize all round their happy villages. It was the women who had charge of the maize, they who sowed, reaped, and garnered the precious grain, for in his infancy Mondamin had many foes, and needed much watching and guarding against blight, mildew, and Wage-min, the cunning thief of the corn-field.

According to the ancient custom of the Indians, Minnehaha went one night, when all slept, and quite alone walked round the fields, trailing in one hand her long night-robe, and making with her foot-prints a magic circle over which no enemy could cross. The night wrapped her round in his mantle of darkness, and the heart of Hiawatha, her husband, went with her, blessing her as she blessed the corn-fields.

But Kahkahgee, the wicked old king of the ravens, when he saw Minnehaha's magic circle next morning, laughed scornfully and called his followers round him. No one could walk over the circle, perhaps, but he and his winged bandits could drop down from the tree-tops and claw up Mondamin from his bed. "Ha, ha," he croaked, "the clever Hiawatha never thought of that."

But Hiawatha happened to be passing just at that moment beneath the tree on which the raven perched, and, overhearing the plot of Mr. Kahkahgee, determined to be ready for him. Watching his opportunity he set traps all over the maize-fields, and hiding himself in the brushwood awaited results.

Before long down came the robbers in a black cloud, all the crows and ravens with old Kahkahgee at their head, and began pecking and clawing up the ground savagely. But they did not peck long; first one and then another sent up a terrified "caw" as they found their claws caught fast in the traps, till the fields were covered with flapping black wings and the air was filled with desperate cries.

Then Hiawatha came out of his ambush and dealt summary justice on the rascals, hanging up their dead bodies as a warning to others.

After this Mondamin slept secure until the sum-

mer sun and soft showers wakened him, and up through the brown earth sprouted a tiny green feather. All through the summer it grew and grew till the tall plant at last stood crowned with its golden grain and waving green tassels.

"Now we are ready for harvest," said old Nokomis one day in autumn. Then Minnehaha went forth and called all the women together, and they stripped off the green tassels and plucked the ripe grain out of the husk with laughing and singing, for wherever Minnehaha went she set the heart rejoicing; and old men, young men, and women too, broke into songs and laughter as naturally as flowers burst into bloom beneath a June sun.

Hiawatha was the happiest man in all the world. Toil was sweet now he toiled for Minnehaha, and the thought that she would be coming down the forest path to meet him at evening lent wings to his feet more swift than the magic moccasins. Together they laboured for the good of their people, always devising some new thing that they might be made happier or wiser. It was Hiawatha who invented for them the wonderful language in painting and written signs, by which they might keep the wise sayings of their teachers, the songs of their poets, and the remedies of the medicine men, and so hand them down to their children.

Taking the smooth, white birch bark he painted

on it with bright colours figures and signs to stand for everything.

Life he drew as a white circle, death as a dark one. Bloody hands with palms upraised were a sign of war, footprints pointing towards a wigwam meant an invitation. Birds, beasts, and flowers each stood for a sign. The household symbol of every chief—eagle, beaver, reindeer, whatever it chanced to be—stood for his name, and when he died was painted inverted on his grave-post, so that the graves remained no longer nameless and forgotten.

So for a time peace, prosperity, and happiness reigned in all the land.

But at last there came a winter of terrible cold. The rivers and lakes turned to ice hard as stone. The hunters, wrapped in thick furs and shod in snow-shoes, roamed the forest far and wide in search of food, and found but little.

One evening Minnehaha and old Nokomis sat at the door of their wigwam awaiting the return of Hiawatha, when in the dusk two figures glided up, and, lifting the curtain, without a word stepped in. Their faces were pale and haggard, their garments scanty and worn.

Minnehaha and Nokomis wondered who their uninvited guests could be, but the law of hospitality forbade their asking any question of a stranger who entered their door.

When Hiawatha returned soon after, joyfully bringing Minnehaha the fruits of his hunting, he also wondered who were the two strange visitors crouching and shivering in the corner of the wigwam. Still more did he wonder when, so soon as the supper was prepared, they sprang up and seized on the best pieces of the deer and devoured them ravenously.

"The poor things are famished," whispered Minnehaha gently to Hiawatha. "Let them take all they want."

The guests spoke no word of thanks. Their pale, weary faces never changed. Day after day they sat speechless in the same corner, whether their presence was desired or no. But at night they went out and roamed the forest, returning with firewood and fir cones for the hearth. Always at meal-times they darted forward and clutched rudely the choicest morsels, but never a word of reproach or remonstrance was spoken by Hiawatha, Minnehaha, or old Nokomis. Never by word or deed did they let their strange guests feel that they were not welcome.

One night, some weeks after their arrival, Hiawatha heard a sound as of deep sighing. Rising from his couch he went to the guests and asked what was their trouble.

They ceased at once their sighing, and spoke in

strangely gentle tones, telling Hiawatha they had been sent to try him and to prove him. They were spirits from the land of the departed, and they must now return, but desired, before they left, to thank him for his noble conduct and the kind, patient hospitality of Minnehaha and old Nokomis.

"Well have you borne this test, O Hiawatha," they said. "Be strong now, and faint not in the harder trial."

Then, lifting the curtain, they passed swiftly and noiselessly out into the dark forest, and Hiawatha saw them no more.

The winter grew colder and colder, more bleak and more dreary. The snow fell thicker and faster until the hunter could hardly make a way out of his buried wigwam into the forest. The birds fell lifeless and frozen from the ice-covered branches. Not a track could be seen of reindeer or bison.

Two terrible visitors stalked through the land, Famine and Fever. One day, like those other two mournful guests, they lifted the curtain of Hiawatha's wigwam, and, entering swiftly and silently, stared with their fierce and hollow eyes at the lovely Minnehaha. And the sweet, sunny face of Laughing-Water turned pale as, shuddering and trembling, she lay down moaning on her couch.

Out into the vast, dreary forest rushed Hiawatha, with his strong ash-bow, to seek food for Minnehaha. And he cried to the Great Spirit to have pity and help him, for his Minnehaha, his beloved, lay dying. His cry echoed through the white, silent woods and mountains, with the answering call, "Minnehaha! Minnehaha!" but all day long he searched in vain for any sign of food. Now hoping, now despairing, on and on he wandered. The forest, which had smiled so brightly on him, and sung welcome with its thousand joyous voices that happy summer when he brought home his bride, now glared at him in stony silence.

And Minnehaha lay dying, wasted by the burning Fever and the cruel Famine. Old Nokomis, with breaking heart, sat beside her, trying to give help and comfort, but, alas! she could not give her food.

As the shadows fell Minnehaha heard the falls of Laughing-Water calling to her in the distance, but old Nokomis said it was only the night wind rushing through the branches. And she saw her father stand and beckon her, but Nokomis assured her it was only the smoke that rose and waved. Then Minnehaha started up, saying she felt the icy fingers of Pauguk clasping her, and she called aloud, "Hiawatha! Hiawatha!"

Miles away on the mountains Hiawatha heard

that cry, and he turned and hastened homeward, his heart heavy and sick with a great fear.

As he entered the wigwam there sat old Nokomis, rocking herself to and fro in speechless grief, and there lay his beloved, his Laughing-Water, cold and silent as the frozen waters.

With a cry of terrible anguish Hiawatha threw himself down beside her. For seven days and seven nights he stayed there, speechless and motionless.

Then they came, and, wrapping Minnehaha in her richest robe of ermine, buried her in the forest outside. And Hiawatha rose and watched beside her grave, keeping the fires alight which for four days and nights are burned that the spirit of the departed may have light on the journey to the Islands of the Blessed.

After that he said farewell to his beloved Minnehaha, who never more in this world would come to meet him with her joyous welcome.

But a great peace had fallen on the soul of Hiawatha. He no longer wished to call back his Beloved to a world where all his love could not shield her from suffering and sorrow, and he knew with a great certainty that, so soon as his work was finished, he would go to her, where, in the Islands of the Blessed, she awaited him.

CHAPTER IV

THE terrible winter passed at last, and spring with its birds and blossoms and tender green smiled over the land.

Hiawatha had taken up his broken life with courage again. One day he told his people of a wonderful vision the Great Spirit had sent him, a vision of things to come.

From out of the land of the morning he had seen a great ship with white wings sailing towards them. In it were a strange people with their faces painted white and beards upon their chins. "And wherever they tread," said Hiawatha, "there springs up a flower unknown to us, and round them swarms the honey-making bee."

The people listened much astonished. Old Iagoo the famous story-teller, had come home from his wanderings up and down the earth with tales of some such people, and they had laughed and said, "What tales he tells us! We don't believe a word that old Iagoo says!"

But the word of Hiawatha and the vision seen by him, that they could not disbelieve, and many

among the old men and the warriors were filled with grave misgiving at the thought of these visitors.

“For,” Hiawatha said, “it is the Great Spirit who sends them; they bear a message from him, and we must welcome them as brothers and friends.”

Not long after a great wooden ship with white wings came sailing over the Big Sea-Water.

Hiawatha saw it a long way off and went down to the shore to meet it. With hands upraised to the sun he stood there in sign of peace and welcome, and greeted the pale-faced strangers as they landed, telling them the doors of all the wigwams stood open to receive them.

The black-robed chief, with a great cross upon his breast, looked on the noble Hiawatha and wondered whether all the people he had come so far to teach, needed him as little as did this son of the Great Spirit. He bowed his head with reverence before him as he said, “Peace be with you, O Hiawatha, and with your people!”

Then Hiawatha led the strangers to his own wigwam, and old Nokomis brought them the best skins to sit upon, and prepared for them the best food, while the warriors and chiefs of the village came to bid them welcome, and with courteous

dignity thanked the Pale Faces for coming so far to see them.

When all the chiefs had assembled to hear him, the black-robed priest stood forth in their midst and gave his message from the Great Spirit, telling them of Jesus and of the blessed Mary, his mother; how he had lived, and died, and suffered for his brethren's sake, and bade all men follow in his steps.

Very attentively did Hiawatha and the chiefs listen to the story. When the Pale-Face priest had finished they rose up and took their leave, thanking him again that he had come so far to see them, and saying they would think on what he had said.

Hiawatha then begged the strangers to rest and sleep in his wigwam during the noon-day heat, while he himself went out alone down to the shore. And as he looked across the Big Sea-Water he heard the voice of the Great Spirit calling him to come, for his work was finished. So Hiawatha went round the village, bidding farewell to his people, and telling them he was going on a long, long journey. And he charged them to care for his guests, to let no harm come near them, and to listen to their words of wisdom.

Lastly, he bade farewell to his dear old Nokomis.

Then going down to the shore he stepped into his birch canoe.

The sun was sinking into the Big Sea-Water in a glory of red and gold as Hiawatha waved farewell to his sorrowing people. Swiftly the birch canoe bore him away. Away and away out to the West, through the Gate of the Sunset, to the Islands of the Blessed, where his Minnehaha awaited him.

“The Learned Princess”



“The Learned Princess”

CHAPTER I

THERE were two Kings whose countries adjoined. Gama, the King of the southern land, had a young daughter, while the northern King had an only son. To cement peace and friendship between the two countries it was settled by the Kings that their children should be betrothed, and, so soon as they were grown up, married in great state. The little Princess was but eight years old, and the young Prince a few years older, when the betrothal took place.

They had never seen each other, but the Prince had a picture of his betrothed and a tress of her long, dark hair, about which he loved to dream, for he was a boy with poet's eyes and the fair, shining hair of the north country. And the girl's face in the picture was very beautiful, so beautiful that each year as it went by found the young Prince looking forward more eagerly and impatiently to the time when he should be allowed to claim

his bride. Eagerly he questioned all travellers from the south, and the rumours they brought of the beauty and talent of the Princess Ida made him long to set forth without delay and see her for himself.

But his father, the King, would not hear of such a thing. He was a stern, stiff-necked monarch, and not a man in his kingdom dare disobey his commands.

The Prince was beset with tutors and teachers all his college days. Whenever he made so bold as to say he would like to travel and see the world, the King dismissed his request with scorn.

"Time enough for travel when thou hast done with schooling," he said.

And when the Prince ventured to hint that he would like to see the Princess, his betrothed, his father answered:

"Time enough when thou art wed — then canst thou feast thine eyes on her every day!"

The King regarded all young women as much the same, provided they possessed the usual number of limbs and features intact. Whether Princess Ida chanced to be tall or short, dark or fair, foolish or wise, he considered no great matter. She was, he knew, a comely maiden of good stock and ancient lineage, a fitting bride for his son. Above all, she was the daughter of old Gama,

with whom he had concluded a very advantageous treaty.

So the years went by until at last the young Prince celebrated his "coming of age," and the King declared the time had arrived for him to wed.

Ambassadors accordingly were sent to the court of King Gama, bearing presents of rich jewels, furs, and embroideries, together with a letter claiming the Princess Ida as the betrothed bride.

The time passed slowly for the young Prince till the ambassadors' return. They brought a letter and a present, a marvellously woven robe, from King Gama—but no bride. The letter though very polite was most unsatisfactory. King Gama allowed a compact had existed, a betrothal of childhood, but now he said his daughter had reached womanhood and had her own ideas and fancies, a strong one at present being that she would wed no man, but live alone with her ladies. The King regretted, but what could he do! It was not his fault that his daughter was wilful!

The rage of the northern King on receiving this reply cannot be described. He tore the letter into small bits like snowflakes and rent the embroidered robe into long, thin shreds, swearing by all the gods of war that he would send ten thousand men and fetch the proud wench, whether she would or no. He would show that silly old father of hers

how to deal with maidens' fancies, forsooth! Calling his captains around him he discussed the plan of campaign.

Then the Prince came forward and begged his father to let him try first what he could do by going himself to see the Princess. Two friends of the prince, Cyril and Florian, asked also to be allowed to accompany him. Florian's sister, the widow of one of King Gama's nobles, was a favourite attendant of the Princess Ida.

But the wrath of the King was too great for him to listen to peaceful measures. "No," he roared, "we will teach her with the iron fingers of war."

Finding his father in this mood the Prince for once took matters into his own hands. That same night before the moon rose, while all the palace was hushed in sleep, three figures stole stealthily out upon the ramparts. Carefully avoiding the sentinels they dropped one by one from the high walls and threaded their way through the dark, quiet lanes of the country.

It was a perilous journey, for they knew pursuit would be instant when their flight was discovered, and not till they reached the frontier did they breathe freely. There they hired horses and continued their journey south, through the vineyards and orchards of a more smiling land than theirs of the north.

They met with many adventures but happily no misfortunes, except sometimes to go hungry and supperless to bed, with no softer pillow than the root of a tree.

At last they arrived at the capital of King Gama, a noble city crowned with the glittering royal palace.

The Prince and his companions were received with all honour by the King, a little, dried-up old man like a withered leaf.

For three days he feasted them, but no sign did they see of Princess Ida, and no word was spoken of her.

On the fourth day the Prince begged a private audience with the King and told him the purpose of his visit.

Gama feebly waved his thin, white hands. He was "much honoured," he declared in a little, high, cracked voice; "much honoured." For his part he would be too glad to see his daughter wedded to such a pleasant, amiable Prince. But the fact was the compact had been made when Ida was a child. Now, alas, she was a tall, head-strong young woman, full a head taller than he was, and in that head of hers were awful ideas, all about women being equal to men had they but a proper training for their minds! Two most troublesome widows, Lady Blanche and

Lady Psyche, had encouraged her in these monstrous notions. Knowledge, they declared, was everything, and women had been mentally starved in the past. Oh, it was dreadful to hear them! his poor old head was dizzy with their new-fangled theories. And all the time he asked nothing save peace and quiet. But that was just what they would not allow him. "No," said his daughter; "peace and quiet are for a cabbage, not for a King! You are placed in a position of power and authority that you may set the crooked things straight." And she prophesied awful changes to come, — changes it scared him even to think of; for if there was one thing old Gama hated and dreaded beyond everything else it was any sort of change.

His poor old face, wrinkled up with perplexity and worry, was quite a pathetic sight. A cruel fate had bestowed on him a daughter he found as difficult to manage as would a gentle old wood pigeon some robust young eagle suddenly dropped into his nest; and when one fine day this troublesome eaglet asked for a nest of her own, though he refused at first, he gave in before long with a great sigh of relief.

So the Princess Ida went off with her followers to a summer palace away on the northern frontier of the kingdom, there to found a university for

women. No men were allowed to set foot in the place, not even her brother Arac, who always took her part in whatever she did.

The Prince's chance of success looked small, but he was determined, come what might, to win this Princess for his bride. Like Brunhilda, she had set a wall of fiery difficulties around her, and only he who dashed bravely through might hope to win.

After much persuasion King Gama gave him a letter to take to the Princess, protesting, however, that it would be useless, since he knew she would refuse to receive him.

Next morning at dawn the Prince, with his two friends, Cyril and Florian, took leave of King Gama. After many days and nights of rapid journeying they arrived one evening at the little town on the outskirts of the Princess's wide domain.

At the old inn they asked for beds and supper, and, while they drank together with mine host of his best wines, inquired how they might best obtain admittance to the palace of the Princess.

The innkeeper looked at them askance. They showed the letter from King Gama. "No matter," he said; "letter or no letter, it is on pain of death any man sets foot within the boundaries."

For miles around, he told them, the fields were

tilled by women; the post was driven by his own daughter and the maid. He had seen her once, this grand Princess, when she passed through the little town. Oh, she was a fine lady! tall, fair, and grave as a cathedral. She made him feel like a fly on the wall, — less than his own stable boy, in truth!

And as the innkeeper talked on, suddenly an idea came to the Prince. "All is fair in love and war!" he cried. "We cannot get in as men, let us then go as women."

Cyril and Florian hailed the plan with delight. Often at the court revels and pageants had these three masqueraded as nymphs, goddesses, and amazons, and had no small sport in such guise.

Mine host was despatched early next morning to buy maidens' gear for the three. His clumsy fingers shaking with laughter, not unmixed with foreboding, the innkeeper fastened together buttons and ribbons. A heavy purse rewarded him for his pains and bound him over to silence, as three fine damsels mounted their horses and rode off briskly.

CHAPTER II

LET no man enter here on pain of death." Such was the inscription that greeted the Prince and his companions at the great entrance, while over the archway stood a statue of Liberty with winged horses. The portress, a large, plain-featured woman, called to a couple of stout wenches, who after helping them to dismount led their horses away to the stables.

The portress then brought them each the academic robe of lilac and gold, and while they donned these garments Cyril inquired who were the chief tutors and which was prettiest.

"Ladies are more wont to inquire who are wisest," answered the solemn portress. "I am no judge of looks myself; more often they prove a snare than a boon — but the Lady Psyche is, I believe, accounted comely," she added.

In the great hall on an ivory throne, papers and tomes piled up about her and two tame leopards crouching at her feet, sat the Princess as the three new students were ushered into her presence.

She rose as they approached, and, beaming on

them like some gracious goddess, welcomed them warmly as the first strangers to join the ranks. She remarked upon their height, inquiring if all the ladies of their land were tall as they.

Cyril, in a respectful murmur, mistrusting his new voice, explained they were from the court, where tall women were preferred.

"You know the Prince?" she asked.

"Yes, lady; you only are his constant theme, his one ideal," the Prince answered eagerly.

A cloud passed over the Princess's fair brow. "These halls are wont to echo sounds more worthy than those of empty compliment and verbiage," she rebuked. "Such language one would scarce expect from maidens wise enough to leave their own land in quest of knowledge." As for their Prince, she would have them know he did not enter her thoughts. She did not purpose to wed any man, having vowed herself to this great work.

The three new students hung their heads. Then the statute books were brought and rules read, to which they signed their adopted names in a feigned hand they thought most feminine, but from which the Princess augured little of their brains.

She was most sweet and gracious, however, as she showed them over the college, pointing out the statues of noble women who had risen above the slaves and dolls who were their fellows—

Cornelia, Agrippina, Sappho, Hypatia, and many others.

"Take these as your models," she said, "and you too will grow noble; petty aims, jealousy, and slander, with which, alas, we women have filled up the emptiness of our lives, will die as you drink of the well of knowledge and wisdom no longer sealed. Drink, and live lives worthy and beautiful."

The light in her eyes, the ring in her voice made the Prince long to kneel at her feet and offer his goddess all worship and adoration. Here indeed was a woman worth winning, but it would be no easy task. The walls around her would be harder to surmount than the fiery flames of Brunhilda!

That day the Lady Psyche gave a lecture to the latest arrivals, and the three strangers were summoned to attend. Florian and Cyril were filled with a spirit of mischief ill becoming the seriousness of the place. The Prince kept an anxious eye on them, and half repented their coming as he heard Cyril's whisper to Florian, "Thy sister is comely, by all that's fair."

By the side of Lady Psyche was her little daughter, the two-year-old Aglaïa, and Florian felt much more inclined to play with his niece than listen to his sister; things serious had never been much to his taste.

The Lady Psyche marshalled forth her facts in startling array from the first history of the human race. It was a long indictment against man. Beginning with him in his paint and feathers she showed how he took all the best feathers for his own head, and going on through all after times how still the same lack of fair play towards woman had prevailed. There were the Chinese, who would not allow her feet to grow; the Mohammedans, who, after a hard time on earth, refused her a soul and a place in Paradise; down to the so-called civilised Europeans, who shut her out of their schools and colleges, dwarfing her brain even as the Chinaman dwarfed her feet. Was it not time that one arose like Miriam, to lead her sisters to the promised land, like Jeanne d'Arc, to fling off the oppressors' yoke! All honour and glory to her, their noble Princess, for founding this first university! If the women would only rise up to meet her, the world of men too would grow nobler and better, for while one half the human race was kept down all must suffer.

The lecture was serious, much too serious for the three new students. They cared more for fun and laughter than the good of the human race, and had it not been for her fair face and sweet voice it is certain Cyril would have feigned a fainting fit before the discourse was half over.

As the students passed out of the hall Lady Psyche beckoned her new pupils to approach, bidding them welcome. Suddenly she fixed her gaze on Florian, and faltered, trembling, "My brother!"

"Why, so it is, my sister," laughed Florian, nowise disconcerted.

But poor Psyche saw no joke. How dare they do a thing so awful! The penalty was death, such they must have seen in letters writ large above the entrance. And to enter thus like wolves in sheep's clothing! She had no choice but to fulfil her duty and deliver the culprits straightway to the Head.

Then Florian pleaded the love and friendship between them since their childhood's days. And the Prince pleaded his fair countrywoman would remember how her forefathers for generations past had faithfully served his house. Cyril did not plead at all, but maintained stoutly that to die at such fair hands would be a pleasure, artfully adding that never had he seen a sweeter, prettier babe than the little Aglaïa.

The three together were too much for Lady Psyche. Her stern resolve to fulfil her duty melted like ice under a summer sun. One promise only she exacted, that they would leave early on the morrow, and till then behave like modest, studious maidens.

This settled, she turned to welcome Florian with words half glad, half sad, when a girl's voice interrupted her. There stood Melissa, the fair young daughter of the stern Lady Blanche, with a message from her mother. She had overheard all while waiting unwillingly at the door. Psyche looked her dismay.

"Trust me," cried Melissa eagerly. "Sooner would I die than betray those gentlemen." Psyche knew she spoke the truth and she could trust her, but from that hour her fear was doubled lest the jealous, watchful eye of the Lady Blanche, her bitter rival, should discover the secret.

Her worst fears were realised when early next morning came poor Melissa, wringing despairing hands, to say her mother had found out all. A random shot abusing the strangers as young barbarians, more like men than maids, a tell-tale blush from the trembling Melissa, and Lady Blanche leaped on the truth like a tigress on its prey. Melissa stood before her mother in a guilty silence, head bent, like a snowdrop suddenly dyed crimson, then fled to warn the strangers they must escape for their lives.

But Cyril took her tragic tale with a light laugh, and, declaring he would win the lady to his side, went off to beard her in her den.

He returned triumphant. It had been no easy

matter, but with bribery he had succeeded in gaining her for the time. The wily Cyril having promised as reward for her silence and help that the Prince would set her up in a magnificent university in his own land, where she would reign as Head, Lady Blanche had consented to think it over until the morrow.

That afternoon the Princess invited the three new students to ride with her and a chosen party to a distant spot on her domain. The Prince felt fortune indeed smiled on him as he rode forth by the side of the Princess. With every step he fell more deeply in love, and he listened with such sympathy and interest as she unfolded to him her grand plans for the future that the Princess thought she had seldom met a more intelligent damsel. Only when he ventured to plead for the Prince, who had so long dreamed of her as his betrothed, did she show impatience and hastily dismiss the subject.

Cyril and Florian rode with Psyche and Melissa, and all seemed well content with their company.

So for a while everything went well. They pitched their pavilion in a lovely, shady spot near the river, and the girl students, flitting about like graceful wood-nymphs, prepared a repast worthy of Titania and her court.

After they had feasted the Princess called for

music, and first one and then another sang at her command.

Meanwhile the Prince watched Cyril anxiously. The gay scene and the sparkling wine were causing him to throw off more and more his modest and maidenly demeanour, and when the Princess turned to the strangers, requesting a song of their own land, he burst out into a jovial ditty about Moll and Meg, more suited for the tavern than the ears of high-born ladies.

Mad with anger, the Prince sprang up, and, commanding him to be silent, struck him a blow which revealed his was no maiden's arm and brought Cyril to his senses.

But, alas, too late. A cry arose on all sides: "Men! These are men—we are betrayed!"

"To horse!" ordered the Princess in terrible tones, which rang like a note of doom in the ears of the Prince. There was a wild rush from the tent, each one flew hither and thither seeking her horse, and in a few minutes all were scattered like whirling leaves to the four winds.

The Prince followed, trying to keep in sight the flying form of his Princess, but fury lent her wings. She lashed her horse to such great speed that as she neared the narrow bridge which spanned the torrent he missed his footing, and in plunged horse and rider.

"She is lost," shrieked her maidens, as the foaming waters closed over her and whirled her down the river.

Flinging himself from his horse, the Prince jumped in, but, strong swimmer though he was, nothing could have availed against that stream had not Fate favoured him, and the flowing robe of the Princess caught in an overhanging branch, so enabling him to reach her. When he had safely delivered the unconscious Princess to her maidens, and satisfied himself she was unhurt, he rode away, not daring to meet her wrath.

That evening all were summoned to the great hall where sat the Head on her throne. Each student was questioned in turn, but denied all knowledge of the traitors. Then came Melissa, shaking with sobs, and made her confession. Lady Psyche was nowhere to be found. Lady Blanche, summoned to the royal presence, defended herself with plausible excuses, and bitterly reproached the Princess for favouritism to Lady Psyche, but in spite of all she said the Princess sternly dismissed her from the university.

Then the proctors, who had taken them prisoners, brought in the Prince and Florian, Cyril having made his escape. They looked but sorry sort of men in their bedraggled women's garments, and felt even sorrier than they looked, for the

hands of the female proctors lay heavy upon them. It was not a proud position for any man.

The Princess, looking down on them like a wrathful goddess, was just about to pronounce their sentence when in hot haste a messenger rushed in, bringing two letters with royal seals.

As the Princess read her eyes flashed fire, her face flushed with indignant wrath.

"Read!" she commanded, flinging the letters down before the Prince.

As the Prince read his heart sank. If anything could have made a bad case worse it was surely these two letters. The first was from King Gama, begging his daughter to deliver up the Prince unharmed without delay, for he had been taken prisoner, and was being held as hostage by the Prince's furious father, who had that night crossed the frontier with his army and surrounded the Princess's domain.

The other letter, from the northern King, threatened if the Princess refused to keep her contract of marriage, and also to deliver up the Prince unscathed, to batter her palace to the ground.

In vain did the Prince protest that this angry missive distressed him as much as it did the Princess herself, that his love for her alone had caused him to invade her sacred domain. The Princess answered that his base deception had

made the very sight of him hateful to her, sooner would she die a thousand deaths than wed such as he. Turning to her body-guard of mighty country wenches, who stood about her throne, she commanded them to seize the miscreants and thrust them out of the gates.

CHAPTER III

WHEN the northern King heard from his son all that had happened, he swore with a mighty oath that either the stubborn maid should yield or there should be war to the death. King Gama he set free, since he had held him only as hostage for the Prince. "But look you," he cried, "that our compact be fulfilled, or the consequences be on your own head."

The poor old King was at his wits' end. Well he knew his daughter feared no threats. The Prince gave him some comfort by declaring that in spite of his rough treatment he desired more than ever to win the love of the Princess, and nothing therefore was further from his wish than war. Then they agreed together to seek the help of Arac, Ida's brother, who, hearing of the invasion of the northern King, had arrived on the scene with his soldiers.

"Arac's word," said Gama, "counts for more with Ida than that of any one else. He may perhaps find some way of settling this matter peaceably."

But Arac, the great, genial giant that he was, could think of no more peaceable means when appealed to than the good, old-fashioned one of fighting it out. Who was right or who was wrong he cared not a jot. He was on his sister's side — had sworn to be so by the sacred bones of some wise lady saint whose name he quite forgot.

So it was decided the Prince should choose fifty of his best men, and Arac the same on his side. If the Prince was victorious, then must Ida keep the contract her father had made, but if he was beaten by Arac, he must waive his claim and retire peaceably.

Since Arac urged it, the Princess Ida agreed to these conditions. Her letter to Arac adjured him to fight, remembering his prowess, his noble race, and the sacred cause in which he fought, yet begged him as victor to spare the life of the Prince, since he had risked it in her service once. Honour and fame, and the gratitude of women of all times to come, Ida promised to her brave brother and the champions who thus fought for her cause.

At noon the lists were ready.

The trumpet blew the signal for the contest to commence.

Watching on one side were the two Kings, encamped with their followers, while on the other

rose the palace walls, from the heights of which the Princess and her maidens looked on with eager anxiety.

For a long time the battle raged fiercely but equally. Many a warrior on both sides was felled to the ground, the horses rolling over and floundering in dire confusion. And always in the thickest of the fight was the great Arac, with easy smile, raining his mighty blows to right and left, and always after him pursued the Prince, but some one ever rode between them.

Once it was Florian, eager to guard his friend and master. Arac bore him down, and Cyril too, as he rushed on him madly. Both fell like ripe corn before the scythe, and then at last the Prince and Arac faced each other.

Swords clashed, and a sharp hand-to-hand fight followed. The Prince looked up and saw the tall, stately form of Princess Ida watching from her height. Cruel she seemed, and triumphant; then he struck out blindly, with a shout fierce and despairing. But only a feather flew from Arac's helmet, and the Prince reeled in his saddle and fell, remembering no more.

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The champions of the Princess were victorious, and great rejoicings followed in her college. Singing a triumph song of victory, the Princess,

followed by her students, went down to the field of battle to tend the wounded who had suffered in her cause.

As she passed from one to the other she saw, among the foemen, one lying apparently dead, while by his side crouched an old man with haggard face and wildly staring eyes. The Princess started, turning pale. It was the northern King, and the lifeless man was the Prince, his son.

The Princess hastened forward. A great fear seized her lest he should indeed be dead. Kneeling she felt his heart, then cried with relief and joy to the old King, "O sire, be comforted; he lives!"

And so it was, for, though sorely wounded and quite unconscious, the Prince was not really dead, and, at the magic touch of his adored Princess, he sighed and for a moment opened his eyes.

Then the Princess begged she might be allowed to take him to her palace, and there nurse and tend him with her own wounded kinsmen, for, in spite of her anger against him, she could not forget how he had saved her life at the risk of his own. And the old King, seeing the gracious pity and sympathy in her fair face, felt all his anger melt away, and gave consent.

So the stern palace of learning was transformed into a hospital, and the students into soft-voiced nurses, flitting to and fro on errands of mercy.

Psyche and Melissa devoted themselves to the wounded Cyril and Florian, — an arrangement those two heroes found so greatly to their minds that they refused to get well until their fair nurses promised to undertake them for life.

For long weeks the Prince lay at death's door, and through all the weary days and nights Princess Ida nursed him untiringly.

Strange to say, the more trouble her patient gave her the less grew her former anger against him, till no shadow of it remained; but in its place a new, strange feeling, which the Princess supposed all good nurses to experience for patients who require much care and watching. And the Prince, unconscious who it was that tended him, murmured the name of "Ida" continually.

At last a day came when he opened conscious eyes again, and, seeing the Princess at his side, gazed long, half believing her to be some fair vision in a dream. Feeling all his strength gone from him, he thought surely he must be about to die. As a last petition, therefore, he besought this "fair vision" that she would stoop and kiss him ere he passed away.

The Princess, fearing he might indeed die, could, of course, do no less than grant his prayer. But no sooner had she done so than the Prince felt all inclination to die vanish completely, and

from that hour showed a strong determination to live.

And during those fair summer days, as the Princess nursed her patient slowly back to life and hope and happiness, he succeeded in persuading her that she could carry on all her great schemes and noble ideas for the good of women far better if she would but allow him to help her. "Men and women," said the Prince, "must rise or sink together; neither can do without the other, and no great good can come to either unless both pull together."

And this is what the Princess came to see, with the help of the new light which love shed on all the hard problems of life. So, though she did not give up her great schemes, she determined to work them out on a new plan.

Thus it came to pass one golden autumn day, when the ripe corn and purple grapes were being gathered in, the Prince also reaped his harvest, and all the countryside rang with glad bells of rejoicing in honour of the marriage of their Princess.

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